

Now, even quilters are angry: How a social-justice design started a feud

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A usually cheery online community of quilters has been ripped apart by a sewing challenge depicting a No. 2 pencil erasing the “in” from the word injustice.

Some members of the National Quilt Museum’s [Block of the Month Club](#), which gives out quilting patterns from an array of artists, objected to the January block, claiming it introduced politics into the 13,400-person group. The design was created by the [Social Justice Sewing Academy](#), a California nonprofit loosely tied to Black Lives Matter that is featured in a new exhibition at the [Paducah, Ky., museum](#).

There’s never been a dust-up like this within the two-year-old international group, members said. Backlash over the block’s perceived political undertones led to charges of intolerance. Then, new versions of the design set off a second round of angry posts and a debate over whether the changes made their work ineligible for a highly coveted label they can receive for assembling 12 challenge blocks into a quilt.

The angry posts pushed the museum’s chief executive, Frank Bennett, to jump into the fray with a statement that encouraged tolerance.

“Let’s be an inclusive community and consider voices different from our own,” Bennett wrote in a post on Jan. 6 that tied quilting to movements to end slavery, promote suffrage and eradicate AIDS. “Let’s embrace our diversity and show the world our humanity.”

Two weeks later, the controversy was still raging, much to Bennett’s surprise.

“I think of the word ‘injustice’ like ‘peace’ and ‘love.’ I don’t understand how injustice is a political notion. Everyone wants to see more justice. It’s universal,” he said in an interview with The Washington Post. “We need to do better than this.”

The clash among quilters is the latest politically tinged controversy to hit online crafting communities. Last summer, the website [Ravelry](#) — a knitting and crochet group with some 8 million members — announced it was banning any post, comment or pattern connected to President Trump and his administration.

SJSA founder Sara Trail was surprised by the backlash to the [in]justice design, especially since she chose the pattern because of its universal message. “It’s a ‘G’ block, if we’re on a movie-rating scale,” Trail said, adding that it was adapted from a block created by a Baltimore teenager. “If we go deeper, [critics of the design] may not like the organization behind it.”

Trail started SJSA after the killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager whose death led to the

start of Black Lives Matter. [The instructions for the block](#) describe SJSA's history and mission.

"There was a whole bunch of hoopla right after it posted. Everybody was one side or the other," Theresa Rose, a quilter from Utah, said. "The whole world is just angry, and it doesn't take much to put anybody over the boiling point."

Early criticism of what some saw as the block's liberal leanings led to a wave of quilters who suggested adapting the design to their liking, an idea that led to pictures of a pencil writing the word love, and another rearranging the letters to create "Just [image of a bee] nice."

"That is not doing the quilt block. That's gaslighting," said Lisa Woolfork, of Charlottesville, leader of Black Women Stitch, a digital space "where it is safe to be black in the larger sewing and crafting community." Woolfork hosted a special Jan. 8 [segment of her podcast](#), "Stitch Please," on the Block of the Month Club dust-up.

"There's a whole lot of white fragility in the quilting community," she said. "There's something about the SJSA that this group doesn't like."

After two weeks of angry posts, quilters including Jan Johnson of Sparks, Nev., were calling for members to put a lid on it. "Drop it and move on," Johnson posted last week.

"There is no quilt police," she said in a phone interview. "Everyone is doing what they want, as long as they do the technique" per the instructions.

Katy Sakash of Madison, Conn., politely noted that such revisions could be insulting to some in the community.

"Instead of erasing justice, I wanted to write 'love,'" Sakash said, quoting some of the posts. "That's nice and sweet and everything, but you can say that because you don't experience injustice. I don't think they realized how dismissive the replacement blocks were coming off."

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