

Infinite Variety: American Quilts and Coverlets, June 17, 2005-September 18, 2005

Creating functional and decorative bed coverings by piecing together scraps of cloth and enhancing the finished piece with decorative stitching is a skill and art with a long history. Although patchwork or piecing probably originated as a way to use fabric scraps, by the 18th century it was not unusual for quilters to purchase fabrics specifically for individual quilting projects. Art became as much a part of the process as thrift, perhaps even the greater part.

Quilting is the process of making a pieced (patchwork) or appliquéd bedcover or hanging: a quilt. The word also describes the stitching that holds the layers of a quilt together. A quilt is defined as a decorative top layer, an interlining layer for warmth, and a backing fabric for finishing, held together with decorative stitching or ties. A coverlet is a decorative top layer and a backing without the interlining. Many quilt patterns are built up from regular repetitions of a design unit sometimes called a "block," but more accurately named a "cell." Specific patterns also exist for the quilting stitchery that binds the layers together.

Since the 1970s, it has been fashionable to look at certain kinds of quilt patterns as anticipating a number of movements in 20th century art: abstract expressionism, op art, color field. Quilts, however, are textural objects that break through the two-dimensional picture plane prized in some modern painting. The tactile nature of the fabrics creates an intimate art form, inviting close inspection of details as well as appreciation of overall composition from a distance.

Quilt patterns were and still are published in magazines and handicraft manuals and traded among quilters. Even when a pattern is followed, however, each quilt artist adds something of her own personality and aesthetic sense to her work. Self-expression is realized through the basic choices of materials, colors, patterned or solid-color fabrics, scale, overall composition, and the combination of imagery for the quilt top and the quilting stitchery. Each decision engenders a new set of questions until the quilt or coverlet is completed. The infinite variety of quilts lies in each individual quilter's answers to these questions.

Quilt Condition and Preservation

In choosing the pieces for this exhibition, the curators held to this guiding principle: condition problems do not reverse themselves in storage. Thus, when beautiful pieces show irreversible flaws that have emerged from use or "inherent vice," it was decided to allow them one last moment in the limelight, suitably supported, before nature continues to take its course. Quilts reflect the varied environments in which they were made and employed. The fabrics used in the quilts were originally finished for the dress or furnishing market with processes that have contributed to "inherent vice" in the cloth. In cottons, black and brown dyes that used iron sulfates and tannins as mordants (chemicals used to make fibers retain dyes) degrade the fibers over time. Similarly, metallic salts added to silk dyes to increase the fabric's weight react chemically with the fibers, causing the fabric to split and shred as it ages. Starching discolors cottons, and bleaching oxidizes and weakens fibers. When in use, the finished quilt suffers from the play of sunlight over its surface, as light fades the

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dyes. An admiring touch contributes damaging oils to the fabric. Variations in humidity and temperature cause fibers to lose strength and flexibility. Dust and food spills attract insects that harm the fabric, and laundering itself, while removing soil, abrades the fibers and also fades the dyes. Relegated to the presumed safety of a cedar chest, the quilt suffers from lack of ventilation, the presence of insects or molds, and brown staining due to contact with acids from ageing wood and paper wrappings.

Conservators can alleviate some problems by wet-cleaning and stabilizing compromised areas; however, disintegration due to dyes or finishes cannot be stopped or reversed. When loss has already occurred, attempts to make the quilt appear as it did originally involve invasive restoration techniques that may cause further damage or introduce variations in color affecting the original design. Thus, despite a quilt's aged appearance, it must be remembered that all of these circumstances mark natural, inherent life stages of an object that has both absorbed and enriched the ambience of many different environments.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

American
Quilt top, 1885-1886
Silk, embroidered; paint
Gift of Mrs. Marion A. Sabol 84.037.1

This piece, made by many different hands, illustrates some of the pleasures of crazy quilting. The makers discarded the rules of geometry and symmetry, instead layering color, texture, and pattern to create the design. Embellishing the surface with fancy silk embroidery stitches, narrow trims, paint, and beads added even more scope for individual creativity.

Crazy quilting became a fad in the late 19th century, fueled by the availability of plain and patterned American-made silk fabrics, competition within the silk thread industry, and the lessons learned from exposure to Japanese aesthetics, which valued asymmetry and spontaneity.



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John Hewson
Ann Thankfull Mathewson, American
Quilt, 1800s
Cotton; pieced and quilted
Walter J. Kimball Fund 39.005

The simple Nine-patch pattern of this quilt focuses visual interest on the colorful floral block prints and finely engraved, geometric roller prints. These fabrics originated in England, but were quickly dispersed overseas to prosperous homes such as that of Providence's Ann Thankfull Mathewson. She likely purchased the border fabric and large-patterned furnishing pieces especially for the quilt, but she may have worked with scrap pieces of cherished dress calicos to produce the Nine-patch squares. Most precious, a printed butterfly, possibly from an 18th-century Indian chintz, anchors the design at center and forms the foundation for Ann's proud cross-stitch signature.



American
Quilt, mid 1800s
Cotton
Gift of Maud E. Backus 44.193

In contrast with the sharp edges, technical perfection, and striking presence of the center star, the corner elements show another personality, less exacting and more susceptible to the trials of piecing when bias edges stretch unpredictably. Similarly, the hand-quilted lines add another dimension to the pulsating dominant motif. The use of only three fabrics is quite minimal for a quilt, but, again, the interplay of print designs adds extra energy to the optical extravaganza of the overall pattern. Note the isolated disintegration of the black dots only in the red fabric.



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American
Doll's quilt, late 1800s
Cotton; pieced and machine-quilted
Gift of Eliza F. W. Taft 47.813

Although a beginner, this quilter already shows a hint of playfulness and experimentation as she tips the quilt's balance by inserting a different patterned fabric in three of the square centers. Girls often honed their sewing skills by starting off with small-scale projects such as this doll's quilt. An obviously inexperienced hand guided the sewing machine in uncertain lines to create the quilted grid pattern.



American
Coverlet, late 1800s
Silk
Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 64.112.4

This quilt artist has explored optical color mixing in both the overall composition of opposed light and dark diagonals and in the makeup of the individual cells, in which she mixes solid colored and checked fabrics. The glowing silk fabrics make the play of light across the surface of the quilt a compelling part of the design.



American
Quilt, late 1800s – early 1900s
Cotton
Gift of Mrs. Edmund A. Sayer 68.111

Carefully chosen by the quilter, about ten-years' worth of scrap fabric were used to create this Log-Cabin-style quilt. Shirting patterns interact with small-scale dress prints to produce a regular, but very active, light-and-dark effect. Ensuring her fun, this quilter challenged herself and the viewer's gaze by incorporating similarly colored fabrics of differing design and scale within the light and dark areas. Note, for example, the varying forms in pink that fluctuate and blend together as one moves away from the quilt.



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American
Quilt, late 1800s
Cotton
Gift of the estate of Lucy M. Eastwood 73.021.1

With a foundation design of simple crosses within a square, this quilter created one of the more unrestrained and experimental compositions in this exhibition. Notice how the arms of the crosses may be made from one, two, or even three separate fabrics and how the placement of the same fabric within a block or an adjoining area blurs the rigidity of the cross structure. From afar, splotches of color pull the eye along a circuitous path that emphasizes animated variety and expressive irregularity.



American
Coverlet, 1800s
Cotton
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.923

Each medallion or cell of this pieced mosaic design is a simple geometric progression, 1- 6-12, developed from the hexagonal shape of the pieces. The artist has explored symmetry and symmetry-breaking (the absence of symmetry where it is expected) through the placement of color and pattern within the hexagonal grid. Look for medallions in which the quilter created a different design effect simply by manipulating the orientation of pieces cut from the same printed fabric.



American
Quilt, late 1800s
Silk; stitched through; ribbon edging
Gift of Mrs. James Elder in memory of Mrs. Leroy Elder 83.072

Fabrics made of silk became more available to middle class American consumers in the 1880s, when tariff laws encouraged the expansion of silk fabric manufacturing in New England and the middle-Atlantic states. The brilliant colors and attractive textures of silk fabrics gave the quilter a new set of options to consider in her work. Compare the different qualities of the ombre graded silk squares in this example with the similar use of color gradation in the cotton calico Boston Common patterned quilt in this room.



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English

Quilt, 1800-1850s

Cotton

Gift of Marjorie R. Yashar 84.240

Organization and symmetry, combined with the specific language of floral, vase, and bow motifs, produce neoclassical elegance as the reigning mood in this early 19th-century quilt. Consider the quilter's great effort to center a graceful bowknot or finely drawn floral bouquet in each alternate square. Sadly, the drab brown fabrics here, so much in fashion at the time, illustrate well the destructive effects of certain dyes and mordants.



Eleanor Eusebia Jordan Casto

Quilt, 1825-1850s

Cotton

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles C. Horton 85.152

The combination of a traditional floral design unit with conservative small patterned calico fabrics suggests that this quilt artist relied more on locally available quilt patterns and less on her own imagination in designing the quilt top. She pulled the quilt out of the commonplace, however, by investing her creativity in developing the complex and beautifully stitched quilting patterns (flower basket, wreath, pineapple, and line in combination) that give this piece great texture and depth.



Susan Gorham Farnum, American, late 19th century

Quilt, 1880-1890

Silk; linen

Gift of Eleanor Seaman 1986.069

The eye-dazzling effects of the ziggurat shapes in this quilt are intensified by the placement of plain and patterned fabrics throughout the individual cells. Although each cell is symmetrically patterned, color alternation creates channels and swirls of color that impart a restless motion to the overall design. The contrast between the symmetry of the piecing and the symmetry breaking in the color use contributes to a balanced but not static composition.



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Katherine Westphal, American, b. 1919
Quilt, ca. 1963
Cotton; stitched through
Gift of Katherine Westphal 1989.120.1

Katherine Westphal has used quilts and quilting among many other media and techniques during a lifetime of making art. She added a new dimension to the quilter's repertoire by hand printing her own fabrics -- perhaps inspired to do so by the ways in which, decades earlier, makers of crazy quilts used embroidery and paint in creating their works.

This quilted hanging was exhibited at Milan's 13th Triennale in 1969.



Pearle Pierrel, American
Pieced quilt, 1930s
Cotton
Gift of Louis and Rosemary Sorrentino 2001.85.1

This 1930s quilt exemplifies the range of fabric available to, and thus the considered choices made by, the home quilter in the 20th century. Using diamonds of solid colors to guide the overall arrangement into the Boston Common pattern, she maintains control but defies strict consistency by also including densely patterned prints of varying scale and hue. Because of their quantity, these pastel fabrics, typical of the decade, appear to have been purchased for this particular project.



American
Quilt, 1800s
Cotton
Museum Collection S83.075

The strict repetition of limited colors and geometric shapes within each unit of this quilt creates a bold graphic impression on the viewer from a distance. Notice, however, that the quilter has chosen to contrast this simple angularity and the expanses of flat color with the natural forms and rough surfaces of the Sunflower patterned quilt stitching in the plain white cells.



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American
Quilt, ca. 1887
Pieced, embroidered, and painted silk velvet and satin
Gift of Mrs. Patricia Barrett 80.280

This crazy quilt was a collaborative project. No attempt was made to limit what the contributors used or how they composed their individual square units. The end result is an expressionist explosion of color and texture, created from 33 separate blocks.

The Women's Relief Corps was an auxiliary to the organization of the Grand Army of the Republic, serving veterans and descendants of veterans who fought during the American Civil War as members of the North's armies.

Ann Dexter, American, 1789-1874
Quilt, ca. 1815
Cotton
Gift of Ruth Rathbun Pitman in memory of her mother, Lillian Nevin Rathbun 1999.85.2

