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Two women put the final touches on a quilt featuring a fan design that was popular in the 1930s. The quilt is stretched on a frame to make it easier for the women to work on it.

Q U I L T I N G

An American Craft

BY PHYLLIS McINTOSH

A quilt can warm a bed, decorate a wall, comfort a child in her crib or a soldier at war. A quilt also can tell a story, commemorate an event, honor the dead, unite a community, and reflect a culture. Quite a resume for a piece of needlework! And evidence, too, that quilts have captured the hearts and imaginations of Americans unlike any other form of folk art.

Quilting has enjoyed a long tradition in the United States and today is more popular than ever. According to a 2003 survey by *Quilters Newsletter Magazine*, there are more than 21 million American quilters (representing 15 percent of U.S. households), and they spend \$2.27 billion a year on their craft. The most dedicated among them are likely to have an entire room in their house devoted to quilting and to own more than \$8,000 worth of quilting supplies. Their creations range from everyday items such as bed coverings, clothing, and table mats to treasured heirlooms and museum quality works of art.

The word *quilt* itself has come to describe far more than stitched pieces of fabric. Civil rights activist Jesse Jackson used the word to describe American society when he said: “America is not like a blanket—one piece of unbroken cloth, the same color, the same texture, the same size. America is more like a quilt—many patches, many pieces, many colors, many sizes, all woven and held together by a common thread.”

Anatomy of a Quilt

A quilt is basically a fabric sandwich made of three layers—a decorative top, a filling, and a backing. The word *quilting* refers both to the process of making a quilt and to the means by which the layers are fastened together. They may be tied with strategically placed knots or secured with stitching, often done in intricate patterns that add to the beauty of the finished piece. Quilters use a frame to hold and stretch the fabric during the quilting process. Some frames are large enough to hold the entire quilt, others small enough to be held in the hand while working on one section at a time.

The filling, known as batting, provides warmth and adds bulk to the quilt. Modern batting is made of natural or synthetic fibers, but early Americans stuffed their quilts with whatever was at hand—dried leaves, corn husks, or fragments of old letters. To make dyes to color their fabrics, they relied on the natural world—flowers, vegetables, bark, roots, nuts, even dried insects. Some early dyes were so corrosive that surviving quilts have only holes where color patterns once were.

Quilt makers lavish the greatest attention on the quilt top, which they construct in several different ways. The classic patchwork quilt is assembled from “blocks” made by stitching together geometric shapes or curved pieces. The arrangement of the blocks and of pieces within the blocks allows for a myriad of pleasing designs. A second type of quilt top is appliqué, from a French word meaning “to put on or lay on.” In this method, fabric shapes in abstract motifs or in realistic forms, such as flowers or animals, are sewn to a background with tiny, invisible stitches. Most appliqué and patchwork quilts have fabric borders that frame the entire design and are also usually quilted.

In a third style, known as a wholecloth quilt, the entire top is a single, solid color, and the decorative stitching, or quilting, provides the interest. Some quilters enhance the look with a technique called trapunto, in which extra stuffing is inserted to raise certain parts of the design in relief.

A Long Tradition

Quilts are likely as old as fabric itself. The earliest known depiction of quilting is an ivory carving dating from the 35th century B.C. that shows an Egyptian king wearing a quilted garment. The oldest surviving quilted object is a linen carpet found in a Mongolian cave and estimated to date from somewhere between the 1st century B.C. and the 2nd century A.D. In the 11th and 12th

centuries, Crusaders introduced quilting to Europe when they returned from the Middle East with quilted garments worn to provide warmth and protection under their armor.

In colonial America, most quilts were utilitarian items, either tied or loosely quilted, and meant to be used for warmth. Even into the early 1800s, most decorative quilting was done by wealthy women who had household help and therefore the leisure time for needlework. To stretch the use of imported chintz fabrics, which were quite expensive, many quilters cut out flowers and other motifs and appliquéd them to a large piece of solid color fabric—a technique known as *broderie perse*.

When American manufacturers began producing inexpensive cotton fabrics in the mid-1800s and especially after the Civil War, quilting became a pastime almost any woman could afford. A popular social event for the whole family was the quilting bee, where a group of women would gather around frames to quilt tops they had pieced together, trading news and gossip as they worked. Children kept the needles threaded; girls and unskilled younger women served food. In the evening, men joined the women for feasting, singing, and dancing.

The 19th century produced several notable fads in quilting. One is the Baltimore album quilt, so named because it first gained popularity in the



Sunburst Pattern

A variation of the Mariner's Compass quilt pattern, this sunburst design adorns a quilt that was made in the 1850s.

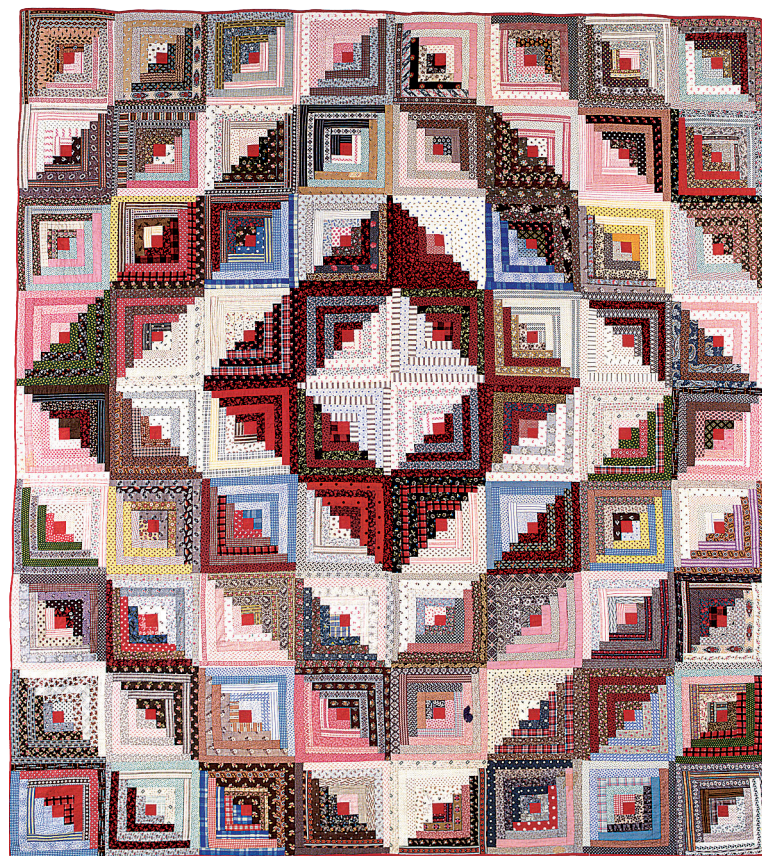
Mid-Atlantic States, particularly around the city of Baltimore, Maryland. Composed of blocks appliquéd with elaborate floral, animal, and patriotic designs, an album quilt often represented the work of more than one person and was so intricate that just one block might feature dozens of different fabrics.

The rage of the Victorian Era in the late 1800s and early 1900s was the crazy quilt, reportedly inspired by art and ceramics in the Japanese Pavilion at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. Crazy quilts were showpieces made of velvet, silk, and brocade fabrics cut and pieced in random shapes, each seam highlighted with decorative embroidery stitches.

Quilting thrived into the 20th century as women's magazines printed and distributed quilt patterns nationwide. Quilt competitions and contests, promoted by giant retail stores, remained popular through the Great Depression of the 1930s. Inevitably, quilting declined during World War II when fabric production focused on the war effort and women went to work outside the home in unprecedented numbers. Quilting did not regain its former popularity until the 1970s when the United States once again looked to its heritage as its Bicentennial approached.

An Endless Variety

Quilt patterns almost certainly number in the thousands. Two quilt pattern encyclopedias published in 1993 featured over 4,000 different pieced quilt patterns and nearly 1,800 applique patterns. Accurate numbers are difficult to come by because the same pattern may have different names in different parts of the county. A design known as Duck's Foot in the Mud on Long Island (New York) became The Hand of Friendship in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Bear's Paw in Ohio. What is known as Mariner's Compass in New England might be called Sunflower in Kansas. The popular Log Cabin pattern, depending on how the blocks are arranged, can be called by such names as Court House Steps, Barn Raising, and Straight Furrows. The Log Cabin pattern, made by sewing strips in light and dark colors around the sides of a square, has a long and fascinating history. Because it became fashionable when Abraham Lincoln was President, some historians think it was a tribute to him. However, the design was used in Great Britain much earlier, and a Scottish quilt expert suggests that it stems from patterns of land cultivation practiced since the Middle Ages. Even more intriguing was the discovery of the pattern in



Log Cabin Quilt

Made in the late 1800s, this quilt was pieced together in the Barn Raising configuration of quilt blocks made in the Log Cabin pattern.

Detail—Log Cabin Pattern (right)

This individual quilt block shows how strips of fabric are pieced together in the Log Cabin pattern.

(quilt and detail) © TENNESSEE STATE LIBRARY/
QUILT INDEX

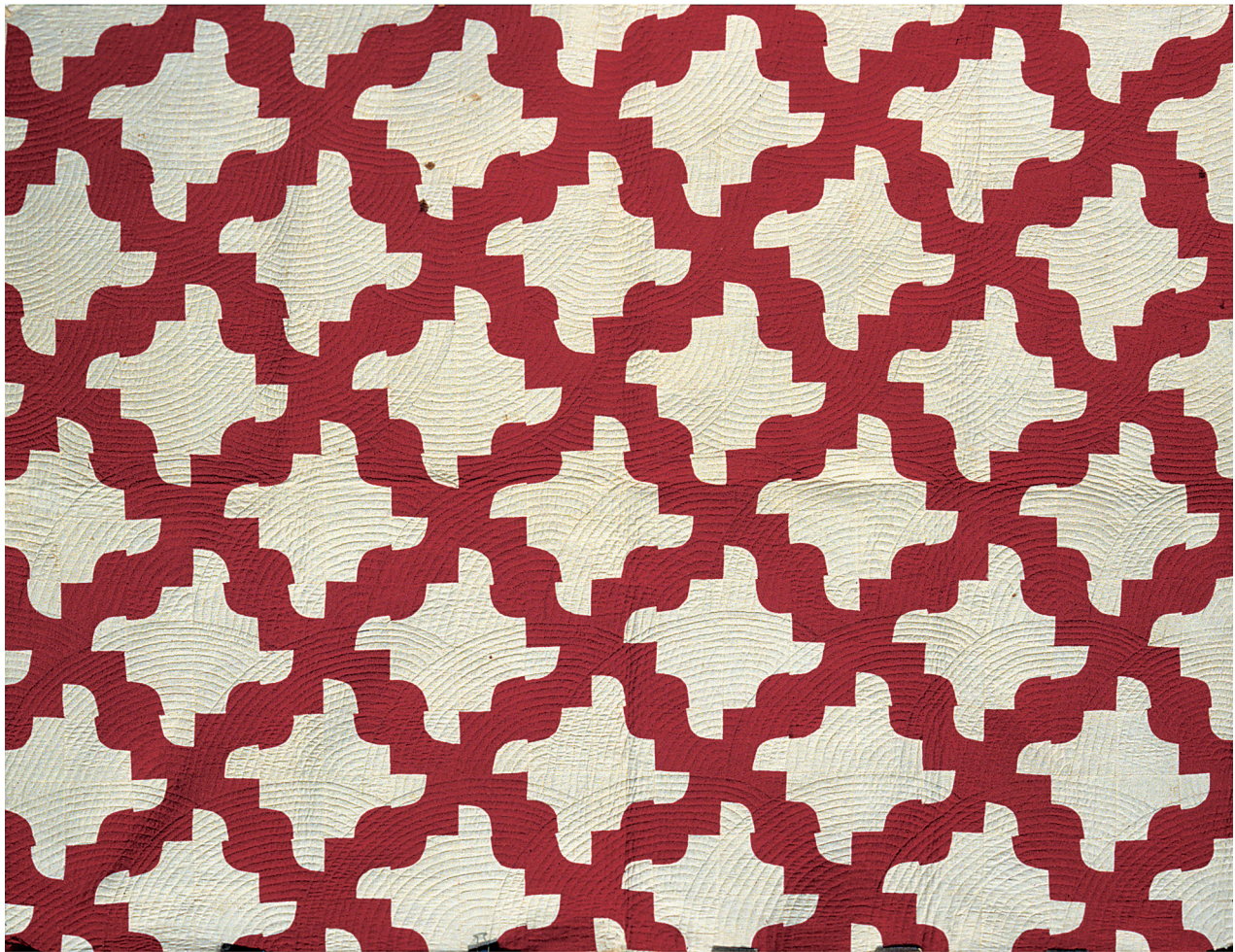


strips of linen wound around mummified cats found in Egyptian tombs early in the 19th century.

Did these mummies, many of which were shipped back to England, inspire some farmer's wife to create a "new" quilt design?

Another pattern with a colorful history is Drunkard's Path, so named because its winding curves suggest the staggering gait of someone who has imbibed too much. Often associated with the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) campaign to outlaw alcohol in the late 1800s, the design is in fact probably much older, though it was used in some quilts made and sold to raise money for the WCTU.

Many other evocative names for quilt patterns were suggested by farm life (Barn Door, Hen and Chicks, Rail Fence) and domestic life (Broken Dishes, Baby Blocks, Puss in the Corner). Patterns with roots in Bible stories include Jacob's Ladder, Job's Tears, Crown of Thorns, and Garden of Eden. Love and romance gave us the Double Wedding Ring, Cupid's Own, and Lover's



Drunkard's Path Quilt (*above*)

This quilt pattern got its name from the curving image it creates, which brings to mind the winding path taken by someone who has had too much to drink.

Amish Quilts (*opposite page*)

An Amish woman seated at her sewing machine is surrounded by boldly colored quilts made in traditional patterns.

Knot, while nature inspired Pine Tree, Bear's Paw, Clamshell, and Turkey Tracks. From the great westward migration across the continent we have such patterns as Prairie Queen, Chisholm Trail, and Sage Bud.

Some distinctive quilt designs are associated with certain ethnic groups. African American quilts, for example, feature bold, asymmetrical patterns and large shapes inspired by African textiles. Black women also produced story quilts to record family events and traditions or to depict stories from the Bible. The most famous of these, two Bible quilts sewn by former slave Harriet Powers, are now in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Equally renowned for their quilt making are the Amish, members of a religious sect who dress plainly and shun modern technology. Known for their simple designs and bold solid colors of

greens, blues, purples, and black, Amish quilts are much in demand and draw thousands of shoppers to southern Pennsylvania, where there is a large Amish community.

Quilts as Symbols of Community and Remembrance

Quilts have long been used to strengthen family ties, preserve memories of old friends, and mark notable events. Mothers of the mid-1800s made "freedom quilts" to mark their sons' passage into manhood at age 21. Album quilts and friendship quilts, adorned with the signatures and remembrances of people who contributed blocks, were given to brides, to families in mourning, and to ministers or friends who were moving away.

In the 1890s, quilts were popular fund-raisers. People would pay a quarter or a dime to have their name stitched on a quilt, and the money was donated to a church or some other worthy cause.



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AIDS Memorial Quilt

The AIDS Memorial Quilt, begun in 1987, honors persons who have died of AIDS. Here the quilt is displayed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., so the public can view it.

Often, the quilt itself was raffled off to raise still more money.

Quilters especially rally to charitable purpose in times of war. During the Civil War, northern women made more than 250,000 quilts for Union soldiers. In the south, women made beautiful broderie perse Gunboat Quilts to raise money for ironclad gunboats and medical supplies for the Confederate army. Today, echoing the tradition, a California quilters guild makes replicas of Civil War quilts to present to families whose soldiers have been killed or wounded in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Quilts are also used to publicize certain diseases and raise money for persons with those diseases or to fund the search for cures. The first and most ambitious of these projects is the AIDS Memorial Quilt, begun in 1987. Some 46,000 panels honor more than 83,000 people who have died of AIDS. The quilt itself measures nearly 1.3 million square feet and weighs 54 tons. It has been seen by 15 million people and has raised more than \$3 million for services for people with AIDS. There are now similar quilt projects to honor the victims of lupus, ovarian cancer, and juvenile diabetes, to name a few. And animal lovers are making quilts to fight diseases that afflict their pets.

Quilts as Art

The last 30 years have brought a tremendous increase in the appreciation of quilts not only as folk art but as fine art worthy of hanging in the best museums. Dozens of museums and historical societies display quilts as part of their collections, and museums dedicated only to quilts are thriving in such places as Kentucky, Massachusetts, Virginia, Colorado, and California.

The event credited with sparking this quilting renaissance was the 1971 exhibition, “Abstract Design in American Quilts,” at the prestigious Whitney Museum of Art in New York City. The first exhibition ever to treat quilts purely as an art form, the show was one of the most popular in the museum’s history and subsequently traveled for nearly four years throughout the United States and Europe.

Elevated to fine art, quilts can command large sums of money. The quilt believed to hold the record sold at auction in the early 1990s for more than \$264,000 and was purchased again later for an undisclosed amount by private buyers who then donated it to the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Stitched in 1867 by a woman in Brooklyn, New York, the album style quilt features outstanding construction, a wealth of different fabrics, and numerous vignettes relating to the quilt maker’s personal life and more broadly to the reconciliation between the North and South following the Civil War, according to curator Carolyn Ducey.

The International Quilt Study Center itself is testimony to the serious regard for display, preservation, and study of quilts in the United States. Founded in 1997 with the gift of 950 quilts from private collectors Ardis and Robert James, the center holds the largest publicly owned collection in the world—about 1,900 pieces at last count—and also offers the only graduate degree in textile history with an emphasis on quilt studies.

Love of quilts and quilting will only continue to grow, Ducey predicts, because “there is somehow a connection to quilts that makes them so accessible to people. You can look at them through

almost any lens—American history, women’s history, even technology, because the desire to produce cotton cheaply helped launch the Industrial Revolution in this country. No matter who you are, you are probably going to find something that will fascinate you about quilts.”

Quilt Talk

applique – a piecing process in which small fabric cutouts are sewn onto a background in a decorative design

backing – the bottom or back layer of a quilt, usually of plain, unadorned fabric

basting – large temporary stitches used to hold pieces of fabric together while working

batting – the layer of stuffing in the middle of a quilt that gives warmth and thickness

binding – the edging of a quilt, which covers and holds all raw edges

block – a square or other regularly repeated shape of patchwork or applique that is pieced to make a quilt top

loft – the thickness and springiness of the batting

patchwork or **piecing** – sewing together small pieces of fabric to make a block or other larger piece used to make a quilt top

quilting bee – a gathering of people for the purpose of making quilts

template – a pattern for marking fabrics for patchwork, applique, and quilting

Websites of Interest

<http://www.quiltstudy.org>

This is the official site of the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which encourages the study of all aspects of quilts.

<http://www.womenfolk.com/historyofquilts>

This site provides a wealth of information about quilting history, types of quilts, as well as links to other quilt sites.

<http://www.quiltersbee.com>

Official site of QuiltersBee, a 1,000-member Internet quilting guild, this website provides lots of quilting chat and useful tips.

<http://www.centerforthequilt.org>

The Alliance for American Quilts, which aims “to connect people everywhere with America’s quilt heritage,” sponsors this online quilting center.

<http://www.americanquilter.com>

Internet home of the American Quilter’s Society, this website keeps members up-to-date on happenings in the quilting world.

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Detail—Bear’s Paw

This pattern, known as Bear’s Paw, is also known as Duck’s Foot in the Mud and The Hand of Friendship.