

# THE AMERICAN QUILT

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## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, needlework was a central fact of life for American women, both an essential domestic duty and their primary, maybe sole, means of artistic expression. They sewed, knitted, crocheted, quilted and embroidered to provide their families with towels, table linen, garments and bedding. The work that follows is about a particular type of bedcovers, made of two layers of cloth padded with soft material held in place by stitched designs - quilts. It is, also, dedicated to all those (anonymous) women who created those works of beauty as well as utility.

The needle, unlike the pen, has always been considered a woman's instrument. Without it, she would have been unable to fulfill her wifely duties and to express herself. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, no woman, whatever her age, social class, or region, grew up without learning how to use a needle. Girls started their needlework training at an early age. Most learned by doing, guided by their mothers. The wealthy attended special schools for girls, as a young lady's needlework skills were counted a part of what made her desirable as a wife, and all who could afford to give their daughters such an education, did so. Needlework education often began at the age of four or five. At anywhere between six and eight, a Colonial girl started her first quilt.

Many adult women found a comfort in hand stitching that nothing else could provide, neither the cigar, nor a glass of sherry. As she mechanically drew her needle in and out of the seam, a woman could let her thoughts go into fields of imagination, plan a charming romance or lay down the project of some helpful reform. Besides, it was only in needlework that a woman held full control; her dowry, income and home were controlled by her husband.

Quilmaking gave the similar personal satisfaction. Even greater one, as we will see in the chapter on "Quilting Bees".

It seems that quilts were always made more out of choice than necessity: women's lives were busy with an infinite number of tedious tasks, so that they must have welcomed the opportunity to experiment with color and patterns as a means of self expression. Some women even worked on two quilts at once, one very finely made - for aesthetic pleasure, and the other less complex and with cruder stitching done in the evening by candlelight.

One can only marvel at the time, care and sacrifice that must have gone into each and every antique quilt. All of them represent the best attempts to create something beautiful out of something useful. As Dorothy Canfield Fisher describes

in her short story, in the old-time New England days a woman had but little time during the day-light hours filled with the incessant household drudgery and it took weeks to make one little square of a quilt. But, the woman from the story (like many other, after all) was simply yearning for self-expression, creative accomplishment and recognition, which were all provided by quilting:

“She rushed through the housework to be able to enjoy the one pleasure of her life....The atmosphere of her world changed. Now things had a meaning. Through the longest task of washing milk-pans, there rose a rainbow of promise. She took her place by the little table and put the thimble on her knotted, hard finger with the solemnity of a priestess performing a rite.  
...[Eventually] on her tired old face [was] the supreme content of an artist who has realized his ideal.”<sup>1</sup>

## THE HISTORY OF QUILTING AND QUILTS

While quilting has come to be identified with the United States, it represents but one example in a textile tradition that has ancient and virtually universal cultural roots. Its functions as clothing, shelter, protection, bedding and its techniques can be found in various forms and combinations throughout the world.

The earliest quilted materials were made in the Orient in ancient times, although no evidence exists to prove when or where the art of quilting originated. However, there is evidence that quilting was done in ancient Greece, Egypt, India and China before the birth of Christ. Persians used it to make prayer rugs, carpets and draperies.

Quilting was brought to Europe by Portuguese traders and the returning survivors of the Crusades. It was used on bedcoverings by the Middle Ages, but an even earlier use was for warm clothing (coats and hoods) and for armor. Made of sturdy material, like linen, and thickly padded and stitched, it was less effective than metal armor, which came later, but it offered at least minimal protection from the spears and arrows of war. When the metal variety came into use, quilted armor continued to be worn underneath to cushion the metal's weight.

By the time the first colonists came to New England, New Amsterdam and Virginia, quilted bedcovers were common in England and Holland, so it is quite certain that bed quilts were included in the household goods these settlers brought with them - out of necessity, as well as for their sentimental value. Evidence from seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century New England inventories and wills

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<sup>1</sup> D. C. Fisher, “The Bedquilt”, *American Patchwork*, pp. 43, 47.

suggests, however, that quilts were the least common type of bedcover as well as the most valued; their average price was five times higher than that of blankets.

Quiltmaking flourished in the period from 1775 to approximately 1840. The decline in fabric prices and increasingly available fabric, plus a rising middle class with money to spend on fabric, made the quilt a more universal bed covering. Economic changes in the 1840's caused changes in the making of quilts. From this time on, the popularity of quiltmaking alternately waned and peaked, influenced by depressions, economic booms and wars. But quilting never disappeared. As a general rule, during periods of prosperity quiltmaking declines; during recessions and depressions it increases. It also appears that quiltmaking increases during periods of national unity, such as the Civil War, the Centennial in 1876, both World Wars and the Bicentennial period.

Hand quilting gradually declined as sewing machines, invented in the mid-1840's, commercially produced such items as quilts, dressing gowns, sleeping bags and hunting jackets. However, the art was revived in the twentieth century to encourage the economy of the southern mountain regions of the United States, and as a part of the "back to Earth" movement of the sixties and of a new interest in folk art. Many people began respecting the traditional crafts of America and quiltmaking above all, but quilts were still not taken particularly seriously until 1971 when the famous exhibition "Abstract Design in American Quilts" was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Quilts are now seen as museum-worthy examples of American folk art.

## TYPES OF QUILTS

### Whole-Cloth Quilts

The early quilts found in the colonies were what are called today whole-cloth quilts: one whole piece of cloth for the top, another for the backing, stitched together with a batting (cotton, wool or, lately, polyester) in the middle. They were usually solid-color quilts, finely quilted (sometimes even twenty stitches per inch<sup>2</sup>) with stylized pictorial schemes of flowers, fruit and other ornamental motifs. Such quilts are actually the original ones; quilts started this way and the style carries through today.

The most typical of the whole-cloth woolen quilts, frequently indigo-dyed to a rich blue-black, were very large, to cover the many layers of bedding piled on the bedstead during the day and the low children's beds hidden away underneath. Other colors used were lighter blues, bright pinks, yellow, red, deep green and browns, some of which still retain their intensity today.

These deeply colored wool quilts with lavish quilting stitches were made of all-wool glazed worsteds currently known as calamanco or glazed camlet. Linsey-

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<sup>2</sup> The fineness of stitching is determined by the weight of fabrics and the thickness of batting.

woolsey, a combination of linen (for the warp) and wool (for the weft) was also much used, as well as chintzes (glazed cottons with multicolored printed designs), made especially in India for the Western market.

Most of the quilts found in the Colonies until the mid-eighteenth century were whole-cloth quilts. The 1830's and 1840's saw the rise of the patchwork quilt, both pieced and appliquéd.

### Appliqué Quilts

Quilt tops that are assembled by sewing smaller fabric pieces to a fabric ground are called appliqué.

In very early quilts, appliqué was done in the "*Broderie Perse*" style (Persian embroidery), the earliest known appliqué technique. This method of appliquéing small pieces of chintz to a white ground, required much less chintz and whole-cloth chintz quilts were very expensive. The method became most highly developed in the United States. It became very popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Preprinted forms, both small and large motifs of flowers, foliage and exotic birds were cut out and sewed down with tiny stitches. Floral baskets and urns, as well as variations of the "Tree of Life" motif, were typical. So popular were quilts with appliquéd chintz cutouts that, by about 1800, fabric printers both in America and in England began designing and printing squares of cloth with popular designs.

Appliqué quilts were almost always considered "best quilts" and signs of affluence in Colonial America and in the South. Women who could afford it cut cloth and experimented with appliqué techniques; the poor turned to piecing patterns, using up the leftovers from other needlework. Most women, however, tried to ensure that one or two of their quilts would be appliquéd.

### Pieced Quilts

The process of combining fabric together to make a quilt is called patchwork. When these smaller pieces are put together by seaming them to each other, usually in geometric patterns, often creating optical illusions, it is called piecing. However, these two terms, patchwork and piecing, are often used as synonyms; when we hear "patchwork", first what we think of is piecing, and not appliqué.

The origins of patchwork, like the origins of quilting itself, are buried in history. Early textile historians believed that patchwork quilts came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony with the first settlers, but later researchers have found evidence (in wills and probate records) to disprove that view. The earliest surviving American pieced quilts date from the latter part of the eighteenth century.

The majority of the nineteenth-century quilts were patchwork or pieced ones, made from stitching together hundreds of tiny pieces of cloth - most often

squares, diamonds or triangles, as curved shapes demanded much more skill. A few pieced quilts were made in the late 1700's and early 1800's, while the great majority date from about 1830 on.

Most nineteenth-century women grew up to make dozens of quilts for themselves and their families; many children were not allowed to go and play until they had finished each day's required amount of patchwork, whether they liked it or not.

Patchwork quilts may be made from scrap pieces of cloth, odd bits saved over the years, from the clothing of loved ones, or from material bought expressly to be used in a quilt. Quilts made from the clothing of loved ones were and still are among those most cherished, and are frequently passed down in a family because of their sentimental value. Chances are such quilts were never used as bed coverings, but to adorn the sofas in parlors.

Whether bought or salvaged, cloth was scarce and very precious, particularly on the frontier, where scrap quilts were the rule, and losing even a piece was a tragedy:

“Calico cost fifty cents a yard, and everything was cut out very sparingly, but mother would give me the tiny scraps to put in my quilt blocks that Grandmother Smith was showing me how to make. I was making a nine-patchblock and sometimes I had to piece the pieces in order to get a little block one inch square.

One day we had been playing down by the shed where we kept old Lina, the cow. I forgot to take my basket in the house with me, and when I went to get it, it was gone.

Mother said she was afraid Lina had eaten it. I think that was the greatest loss I ever had in my life, and to this day I remember how badly I felt. My little heart was nearly broken”.<sup>3</sup>

Their ragbag or scrap quilts gave women a source of pride and accomplishment, and occasionally protected their sanity. While they might seem to require the least planning, they may in fact be the ones quilters spend most time thinking about.

To this day women often make quilts to keep occupied if nothing else. In times of trouble, especially during wars, women turned to the only option open to them to assist, their needles.

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<sup>3</sup> Kate B. Carter, *Heart Throbs of the West*; quoted in J. W. Reiter and W. Lawitt, *Labors of Love: America's Textiles and Needlework, 1650-1930*, p. 48.

## QUILT STYLES AND PATTERNS

Most American early quilts, whether pieced or appliquéd, were made in the central-medallion style which consists of a large central motif surrounded by multiple borders. Even whole-cloth solid-color quilts, in which the only design was the quilting itself, were made in the framed medallion style. This style was typical of the Indian palampores (chintz bedspreads) and traditional English quilts, and was the one that colonial needleworkers revised and adapted to create a uniquely American style of quilting.

Early eighteenth-century quilts were sometimes made of four blocks. It is uncertain whether this design was a regional variation exclusive to Pennsylvania quilters, or the precursor to block-style quilts.

American quilters developed the block-style quilt in which the overall pattern was derived from a series of smaller repeating blocks, each with the same design. In some cases two different blocks would alternate.

The block style, the most significant American contribution to quilting, seems to have appeared in the early nineteenth century, and became popular after 1840's. It made the whole job easier; instead of working with a bulky piece of cloth the same size as the finished quilt, blocks were small and portable. They could be carried from room to room, or even to friends' and neighbors' homes, so that quiltmaker's hands were never idle.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the block designs became increasingly elaborate, the color and fabric combinations more varied, and the piecing smaller and more intricate. These developments reflected technological advances that has increased women's leisure time, made greater quantities of fabrics available at lower costs, introduced chemical-based colors, and produced the sewing machine.

The most important aspect of the advent of block-style quilting is that it produced hundreds of geometric patterns and also led to the creation of friendship, album, signature and bride quilts.

### Patterns - Names and Symbolism

All quilts have names, but specific names, i. e. common names for particular patterns, became common with the rise of the block-style quilting.

At first, women took their patterns from quilts they had seen, from a pattern shared by a friend or neighbor, or possibly from a pedlar carrying patterns with his other wares. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, ladies' magazines and newspapers began publishing and advertising printed patterns, making them easily available. Many women created their own designs.

If there are hundreds of block patterns, then there are surely thousands of names for them. Every time a quiltmaker made even the slightest variation to a

pattern, she gave it a new name, deepening so the mystery of a quilt. Naming and varying a pattern was, and remains, one of the ways a quiltmaker added her soul to her quilts.

The names given to the quilt designs were inspired by and came from a great variety of sources: everyday life, religion, nature, politics, national history, social events, and so on.

Biblically inspired patterns, like “The Rose of Sharon”, “Star of Bethlehem” and “Jacob’s Ladder”, were very popular, as religion was an overwhelming factor and comfort in women’s lives and the Bible was often the only book in a family’s home; it was a source of inspiration both spiritually and practically.

The “Pine Tree” is the most authentically American symbol, used on quilts to the present day; the “Oak Leaf” is the symbol of strength and virility; the “Pineapple” of hospitality and a house open to friends and strangers alike; the “Pomegranate” is a symbol of fertility and was often used in bride quilts, just like “The Rose of Sharon” was traditionally reserved for a bride’s quilt.

Romance abounds in quiltmaking in bridal quilts and blocks with names like “Cupid’s Arrow”, “Bridal Stairway”, “Eternal Triangle” and the “Double Wedding Ring”, the most well known curved quilt pattern.

The Lincoln-Douglas debates in Illinois senatorial campaign in 1858 produced several patterns, including “Lincoln’s Platform” and “The Little Giant” (for Stephen Douglas), allowing women to express their political preferences at home, if not at the polls. Without the voice of the vote until 1920, American women sewed their opinions into quilts.

In moving around the country, quilt patterns were often renamed by quiltmakers for something with which they were more familiar. The “Bear’s Paw” pattern of the East became the “Crow’s Foot” of Illinois, the “Duck’s Foot” on Long Island and the “Hand of Friendship” to the Philadelphia Quakers. Changes reflected new locations and the living conditions of the quiltmakers rather than any major change in patterns. The “Ship’s Wheel” of New England became the “Harvest Sun” in the West. The geometric pattern “Ducks and Ducklings” was also referred to as “Hen and Chicks” and “Corn and Beans” (inspired by the practice of planting pole beans between rows of sweet corn). All of these names reveal regional differences.

Pattern names were also changed because the original name held connotations that the quiltmaker did not want connected to her quilt. In this way, the “Wandering Foot” became the “Turkey Tracks” because of a superstition. It said that a husband who slept under such a quilt would be taken up by wanderlust and the wife could end up following him to the ends of the earth or, at best, to a lonely cabin on the prairie.

The swastika form, actually considered a good luck symbol, was a popular quilt block pattern. It is found in almost every ancient and “primitive” culture, including North American Indian Art, and Croatian folk art, especially on Easter eggs. When it was taken as a symbol of Hitler’s Third Reich, it quickly disappeared

from quilts. Pieces already made were renamed “Crazy Ann”, “Twist and Turn” or “Devil’s Puzzle”

Names that now seem puzzling would have been easily understood in their own day. The pattern known as “Hole in the Barn Door” seems a mystery, but it is easily explained by someone familiar with country life. Namely, before there was electricity in barns, small diamond-shaped openings were cut high in the barn door to let in light. The same pattern was also called “Churn Dash”.

“Log Cabin” blocks are made to resemble the pioneer homes that inspired them. The basic block starts with a square in the middle to which strips of increasing length are added. The center square is traditionally of red fabric to represent the central heart of the home. The remaining strips are the “logs”. The “Log Cabin” is one of the most enduring patterns and probably the one that lends itself to the most variation. One of them is “Courthouse Steps” pattern which adds strips to the opposite sides of the central block, instead of adding the strips in a circular way around it. The symbolism in the “Courthouse Steps” is also different: here the central square represents the building, while the horizontal strips are the steps leading to it and the vertical strips are the columns supporting it.

By manipulating shades of light and dark quilters have achieved graphic effects that rival in intensity those of the twentieth-century’s abstract painters.

### Friendship, Album and Signature Quilts

The turn away from central-medallion to block-style quilts, that began in the early nineteenth century, made these quilts possible.

Friendship quilts developed along the eastern seaboard in the 1840’s. They have probably originated from the concept of the album books that were popular at that time. Guests to a home would sign the album book, often including verses or drawings.

These quilts are made two ways. In the first, a group of quiltmakers chose a pattern (most often blocks were of the same pattern), each one made a block, the group then assembled the quilt and gave it away; in the second, a quiltmaker made all the blocks herself and then had her friends sign the blocks of the quilt. The latter is also known as the autograph quilt. These quilts were often inscribed with more than just signatures; poems, Bible verses and personal notes were all popular. Verses just for this purpose were published in the ladies’ magazines of the day. Later versions have only the signature of the maker or a friend.

Briefly, friendship quilts were group projects with each block made or signed by a different person.

Slightly different form of the friendship quilt is the album quilt which appeared as a new fad. Constructed of blocks, most often done in appliqué, it was made by a number of women, friends or relatives of the person to whom the quilt was given. Each block had some meaning to the maker. They were carefully thought out and expertly worked.

Album quilts were a form of remembrance (like friendship quilts, after all), each quilt block - like each album page - offering something that would call its maker to mind. They were made for various occasions and events: when a friend or clergyman moved away, when a young man reached twenty-one, as wedding gifts, even as engagement gifts for young men.

The women contributing squares to the quilt would design and work their squares at home, then bring them along to a formal album party where the squares were merely looked at and admired, or sometimes set together, backed, stuffed and quilted.

The most outstanding examples of the album quilt are the elaborate, highly styled pieces referred to as the *Baltimore album* quilts, made for approximately two decades (1840's and 1850's). These are the quilts with large blocks and brilliantly colored appliqués on white grounds. The appliqués, expertly cut and stitched, show traditional as well as innovative designs. To the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century design vocabulary of vases and urns of flowers, wicker baskets and cornucopias of fruit, some new were added, especially objects of local significance: well-known buildings and monuments, the Delaware State Seal, even a steam engine called a "one-armed Billy" that had its first run in Baltimore.

These quilts were, in fact, made also in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Virginia and other eastern seaboard states. The name "Mary Evans" is often associated with the Baltimore album style, but it is certain that she did not make or even have a hand in every Baltimore album made, as was once thought.

Such quilts were highly valued as gifts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and are equally valued by collectors today. The highest price ever paid for a quilt at an auction was \$176,000, and it was for a Baltimore album quilt.

Signature quilts were most popular in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth. They were usually fund-raisers. By paying a certain amount of money, you could have your name embroidered on the quilt. When it was covered with names, it was given away or raffled off and the money raised was used for churches, abolitionist activities, weapons, library books and so on. Women still meet today to make quilts and raise money for similar causes.

## Crazy Quilts

The crazy quilt - so called for its randomly shaped patches, which give it the appearance of crazed porcelain - enjoys a comeback recently, but it is nothing compared to the amazing popularity it enjoyed in the late Victorian era. The origins of the crazy quilt are uncertain; at one time many people attributed the beginnings of it to as early as the arrival of the colonists to the New World. This theory is no longer considered to be likely.

However, the crazy quilt style is the oldest pieced pattern. It was out of necessity that American quiltmakers first started experimenting with new patterns

(quilts had primarily been made of whole cloth). Its advent is supposed to have risen out of the scarcity of fabric and the use of every little scrap. Women collected any bits and pieces they could find and arranged them according to the contemporary taste. The leftover fabric from other home needlework was used; even worn clothing was cut of its good spots, salvaging fabric that could be used.

It was not until the mid to late 1800's that crazy quilts became uneconomical. Once the lowliest of quilt designs, with purely functional use of leftover fabrics, they became exquisite, elaborate and expensive. During this time, quiltmakers bought fabric (silk, satin) specifically for the quilts, instead of using scraps from the home.

The fad seems to have been related to the great American interest in all things Japanese, stimulated by the arts and crafts shown at the Japanese Pavilion of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. It was at this exhibition that American women were first exposed to the arts and culture of Japan. They saw a style that was not strictly symmetrical, they saw beautiful fans and opulent embroidery. Several contemporary magazines traced the crazy quilt to one particular source - some Japanese picture in which was a sort of "crazy" tessellated pavement composed of odd fragments.

A crazy quilt was more carefully planned than it might have looked at first glance. The fabric was carefully stitched to achieve a randomly placed look that was anything but random. Straight lines, for example, were not acceptable. It saved time if a few of the smaller pieces were joined by a sewing machine, but this gave straighter lines, so it was not suggested by popular women's magazines. If, on completion, there were any angularities offending the eye, they could be hidden by the application of ovals or other curved forms being put on the top and worked around.

When the foundation was complete, the embellishment began and often did not end until the maker's death. It included elaborate embroidery, beads, lace, dried flowers and even painted designs. So ornate was much of this work that the primary function was no longer as a bedcover; mostly, these pieces were made for show and ended up in the parlor where they were thrown over a chair or a piano. They served to display their maker's talents for all to see.

Moreover, a crazy quilt became a status symbol - it required more than just material, it required a huge amount of leisure time and leisure time was something found only in a prosperous household. If a man could invite associates and neighbors into his home and it contained visible signs of his wife's leisure activities, it was a sure sign of his success and prosperity. He was able to provide her with both household help and luxurious materials; her accomplishments reflected well on him.

## All-White Quilts

Of all the varieties of quilting, none is more elegant or more difficult to master than the white-on-white stitchery known as white work. This broad term includes a number of different techniques, all of them having in common the use of white stitching on a white ground.

In America, white work gained steadily in popularity until the 1790's, when it represented the height of fashion - so much that entire bedrooms were done in white. An all-white bedchamber was a young woman's dream. So popular was the idea of a white bedcover that by the middle of the nineteenth century women turned their white-backed patchwork quilts face down on the bed, so that with the white-on-white quilting stitches uppermost, they looked like the desired all-white article. White whole-cloth quilts, whether imported or domestic, were the predominant form of fancy bedcovering.

All-white quilts required great skill with the needle and were attempted only by the most experienced needleworkers. They could take as long as several years to complete. Most would have been worked on only during the daytime, their fine white stitches on a white ground being too difficult to see at night in what artificial light was available.

Most of the white bedcovers were bridal pieces, judging from the embroidered names and wedding dates they bear.

Extremely popular for a longer period of time were they in the South. They remained in vogue among fashionable ladies until the 1830's, and continued to be made in rural areas as late as the 1850's or 1860's.

## Amish Quilts

Distinctive ethnic traditions and regional styles developed during the nineteenth century.

The fascination of Amish quilts lies in their use of pure colors. The lifestyle and religion of this religious sect prohibited adornment of either their body or their home, so they made their quilts in solid colors (no prints were available) and abstract designs only.

The characteristic palette on these quilts includes browns, blacks, dark blues, greens, reds and purples or another brilliant color, often shocking in its intensity. The way in which colors are combined is a distinct Amish trait; colors that seem inappropriate together, create wonderful movement and appeal when placed close together.

The scale of the designs is very large, and the designs themselves mostly very simple. Most popular are the simple "Strips" and "Bars" patterns, "Diamond in the Square", "Sunshine and Shadows" (variation of the "Log Cabin") and the "Trip Around the World",

The best examples of Amish quilts were made from the 1860's through the 1930's; thereafter the Amish also used synthetics, which lack the true feel and color of the natural fibers.

Not all of the Amish people remained in Pennsylvania. Some moved west to Ohio, Illinois and Indiana, where their quilt designs were influenced by the quilts from the world outside their own communities. These Midwestern Amish quilts are made in patterns composed of many more pieces ("Broken Star", for example), than the Pennsylvania Amish examples, often in a combination of light-colored prints and black. They still have their own particular, identifiable Amish look, distinguishing them from non-Amish patchwork quilts.

### African - American Quilts

Although African-American quiltmakers have been working in traditional American quilt formats, their type of quilt is different in visual impact; design and color principles and improvisations are based on the art and creative freedom of their unknown ancestors. Drawing on their African heritage, African-Americans created the New World blends of appliquéd imagery, string piecing, asymmetry, freehand forms, and improvisational process for which their quilts have become celebrated.

These quilts at first seem disharmonious because of their use of contrasting primary colors and the irregularity of the piecing, these two characteristics being antithetical to Anglo-American values in quilting. However, it is irregular piecing that gives these quilts a layer of movement, just as the use of color moves the eye toward what the quiltmaker considered important parts. The placement of a particular color in only one part of a quilt, concentrates the eye on that section and reveals the pattern designs used there.

In times when their African languages and religions were banned, African-American quiltmakers used their African designs in the appliquéd quilts that they made, and the sense of color and style in their pieced quilts was also inspired by African tradition. These women knew from their mothers how to make vegetable dyes and could turn rough slave cloth into every color of the rainbow. They also used worn clothes and scraps from the mistress of the house.

Besides the quilts for their own use, slaves in the pre-Civil War South made the clothing and quilts for the members of the household. A source notes that the quiltmakers tended consciously to make more regular quilts for white people, which proves that they were self-conscious about the irregularities mentioned above.

It is said that the "Log Cabin" quilts made with the black square in the center and hung on the clothes line, designated a safe stop on the Underground Railroad for slaves during the Civil War. Quilts were also made as a map to the Underground Railroad.

As the abolitionist movement grew in the north, quilts were sold to raise money for the abolitionist cause. Women inscribed their needlecases with the phrase: "May the work of our needles prick the conscience of the slaveholder".

## QUILTING BEES

Quilting bees date from Colonial days and are purely American addition to the art of quilting that continues to the present. Today's quilt guilds and clubs are the natural evolution of the Colonial quilting bee. And they are held for the same reasons: to further the education of the individual on quilting technique; to share patterns and fabrics; to gather together in a social context; to talk and laugh.

Eighteenth-century diaries mention the custom of taking spinning wheels on social visits and spinning contests. These affairs, which offered a welcome break in the daily routine, are believed to be the forerunners of quilting bees.<sup>4</sup>

Almost from the first, the social aspect of quilting, the chance to chat and work with other women, was one of the charms of quiltmaking. The bees, or "quiltings", were parties as much as working occasions. They were important means of socializing for women (and men) of all sections of the country, particularly those of the great plains and western states, as it was a rare opportunity for them to see other women. In the South they were held with great regularity.

Women spent long winter months piecing their quilt tops and over the summer months called on their friends and neighbors to help quilt them. So, alone they pieced, but together they quilted. There was usually only one main heated room that was too crowded during the winter months for a quilt frame to be assembled. When the weather became warmer, an invitation was sent to the neighbors for the quilting bee.

Some women were very fussy as to who was invited to a quilting, wanting only the most skilled to work on their quilts. Bees became exclusive; the inexpert, or disliked women of the community were not invited to join in the work, so that any woman who wanted to get ahead, or fit in, was wise to sharpen her needlework skills. Occasionally the stitches of a less skilled quilter were removed after the bee and redone by the quilt's owner. Pride was taken in one's stitches.

On the day of a bee, the guests arrived early, admired the quilt top and either set to work attaching it to the quilt frame, or began marking the quilt top which had been put into the frame by the hostess. Very often, plates, thimbles and tea cups were used to mark the quilting patterns. The quilters would then begin to quilt the top while exchanging conversation; no one wanted to miss a quilting as this was a major social occasion and chance for gossip. If you were not there, yours could be among the names bandied about over the frame.

Usually a quilting bee consisted of eight women: seven guests and the hostess. To work comfortably and efficiently, this meant two women on each side

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter "Relevant Customs in Croatia", p. 22.

of the quilt, their heads bent over the job, talking and sharing details of their lives. In the areas where a neighbor traveled a long distance to attend, the quiltmaker might wait until she had two tops to quilt and would invite fifteen women. They would work in shifts, alternating between quilting and preparing the evening meal until the stitching was complete.

In Colonial and pioneer days quilting bees were family and community events involving women, men, boys and girls. The quilt had to be finished before the late afternoon when the husbands and sweethearts joined the ladies for a festive supper. After supper all stayed for talk, games and country dance with fiddles accompanying the dancers. It has been recorded that a 1752 quilting bee was held in Narragansett that lasted ten days!

Around the 1840's bees became exclusively female gatherings. The men were not invited and the supper, dancing and games ended. But for the pioneer women who joined their husbands and families in the westward migration, bees continued to be eagerly sought social events. Often there was only one quilt frame in the area, another reason for continuing the tradition of quilting bees.

Little girls held friendship bees. Each girl brought enough scraps from her own clothing to make a block. When the blocks were finished, they were set and the completed top was given to one of the guests. The girl who received the quilt then gave a friendship bee of her own at which another girl was given a quilt. The round continued until each of the guests received a completed quilt top which would be stored till the girl was engaged.

In urban areas, album parties were held to make quilts for revered members of the community or a soon-to-be-moving-away, beloved minister's wife. As it was said before, at such parties the finished squares were merely admired, sometimes also set together, backed, stuffed and quilted. Bees were/are also held to raise money for churches by either raffling off the finished quilt, or by working for hire to quilt someone else's patchwork top.

The quilting bee was an important part of the social life, surpassed only by religious gatherings. Bees still take place today, though they are more likely to take the form of a church or charity organization which quilts to raise funds for well-deserving causes.

There are over 4,000 quilt guilds in the United States; they work together, share their knowledge of quilting technique, history and lore. Contemporary quilt groups make quilts as social and political statements also. The Idaho Peace Quilt Group makes quilts that symbolize peace and sends them to powerful leaders in foreign countries.

The Freedom Quilting Bee in Alberta, Alabama, was founded in 1966 out of the Civil Rights movement when more than sixty black women formed a co-op to make quilts, supplement their incomes and create a local industry.

## RELEVANT CUSTOMS IN CROATIA

Bees, meetings of neighbors and friends (more often female than male) for the purpose of finishing some jobs and/or for amusement, were probably held throughout the world, but here we will stay within the boundaries of the United States and Croatia. There is no evidence that Croatian women held quilting bees, although the craft of quilting was known there also. However, in the Croatian capital of today, for instance, there is only one workshop where you can have your quilt made and repaired.<sup>5</sup>

Other kinds of gatherings were held in the rural parts of Croatia, either to do a job (spinning, knitting, mending, picking feathers, shucking corn-cobs, etc.) or simply just for amusement. More than thirty people, male and female, gathered at some of these bee-parties (these remind us of early American quilting bees involving men, women, boys and girls). They were generally held during long winter evenings in the main (large and heated) room of a peasant joint family, i. e. *zadruga*<sup>6</sup>. Participants spent the time talking about the adventures of fellow-villagers, about the weather, crops and troubles of the country life, telling stories of supernatural creatures, playing different games, listening to the songs of a folk fiddle-player or a bag-piper. At the same time women were busy with their distaffs and spindles.

Young men from other villages used to come if there were girls in that particular or a neighboring house, so that this was a major opportunity to meet future spouse. Girls, in the company of women, spun or picked feathers; young men talked and drank with married men. Although they were separated, the groups listened to each other. Women usually talked about the prospective wedding of a girl, especially about the dowry. Such talks were, in fact, announcements for everybody concerned that girls were marriageable.

Spinning and weaving played integral roles in old Croatian households, as well as in early American ones. In nineteenth-century rural settlements every article worn by man or woman, young or old, was spun, woven and made by housewives at homes. Towels, table linen, and bedding also had to be made. Every woman knew how to do her part and most of them turned a utilitarian practice into a form of art, decorating the items with elaborate embroidery.

Mothers made their daughters work very early in life. In Slavonia, the north-eastern part of Croatia, a girl would work at a loom all day long, until there was enough light. In the evening, when it was too dark to weave, she would take her distaffs and go over to her friend. When the weather was fine, girls, equipped with their distaffs, met in front of a house and, sitting on a bench, they spun, talked, laughed, and sang to attract young men. Housewives usually wove till late in the night, but they started only after they had finished all household labors. Before

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<sup>5</sup> "Stari hrvatski zanati: Poplunarstvo za dobar san". *Slobodna Dalmacija*, Feb. 25, 1997, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> The term denotes multiple family community, precisely organized and based on sharing of rights and duties, on the common leadership, and on regulation of male and female work.

World War I, every peasant joint family had a large room with as many hand-loom as there were women in the house. Those women naturally had more fun while weaving, because they had company.

Although some women considered weaving much harder than working on soil, most of them found a relief in it; it provided a creative outlet and freed a weaver from her dark thoughts and worries. This is the role that was also played by needlework.

Important part of a dowry in southern Croatia was a bedcover crocheted from white cotton threads. Its name “kuvertur” or “kuverta” has certainly been borrowed from Romance languages (French *couverture*, Italian *coperta*, both meaning “covering”). Having done all the housework, women got together in a courtyard or by the fire-place to crochet these mosaic bedcovers. At least a year was needed to complete one, and the dowry had to be ready on time. With the hooked needles in their hands, they also “crocheted the threads of happy thoughts” about children’s future. Each woman wanted her “kuvertur” to be somewhat different and nicer, as if this might contribute to the marital happiness of her daughter. Just like “best quilts”, these spreads were intended for decoration on festive occasions only. Similar spreads were popular among the American ladies in the Victorian era. It was customary to have at hand some light piece of work, with which they could at any time be employed.

The cultural disapproval of “idle hands”, which existed on both sides of the Atlantic, did not allow women to spend any moment without being useful to their families and communities. A bee gave them an opportunity to get together with neighborhood women, something women could not do often because they were so busy and obedient. Anyway, whether American or Croatian, women always had their hands quite full, but the charm of some tasks lay in the fact that they were performed in good company and resulted in the real works of art.

## OTHER AMERICAN CUSTOMS ASSOCIATED WITH QUILTING

The most festive quilting bees were held to quilt a bride’s quilt. As much as with bees, quilts have traditionally been associated with brides, the best known custom being that of a young woman completing a baker’s dozen of quilts before she married. Twelve of them were likely to be everyday bedcovers, but the thirteenth must be a girl’s bridal quilt, as elegant and elaborate as she could afford to make it.

This tradition of a bride bringing thirteen quilts to her marriage, as parts of her dowry, meant that girls started piecing and appliquéing their tops early in life (at friendship bees). Only the tops were made; they were quilted and finished when the engagement was announced, as filling and backing were expensive investments, not made until it was certain that the quilts would be needed to furnish a new home. Besides, if a bridal quilt had been started before a girl was betrothed, it was said she would never marry. Any girl who invited her friends over for a quilting party to

work on her tops was actually announcing her approaching marriage. The time between engagement and wedding was a flurry of quiltings.

Along with pineapples for hospitality, cornucopias for abundance, and doves for peace, hearts were the traditional motif for bridal quilts, but they were considered unlucky if put on a quilt before a girl's engagement was announced. A bride's quilt was the only one that could include hearts in the pattern or quilting design. To place a heart in one of the other twelve quilts was to invite spinsterhood.

Quilts carried with them some more superstitions. In some areas it was considered bad luck for a prospective bride to help stitch her own bridal quilt, although she could help mark the quilting lines, sign and date the quilt when it was finished, as some girls did in cross-stitch with strands of their own hair. Otherwise, signatures and dates were written in indelible ink, embroidered, appliquéd, or quilted.

Different customs prevailed in different parts of the country. In Pennsylvania, when the women had finished their work at a bee, the quilt was taken out of the frame and each corner was given to an unmarried woman (sometimes young men also participated). A cat was thrown into the center of the quilt which was vigorously shaken; the young woman nearest the cat when she jumped out, would be married within the year, or at least would be the first one to get married.

Sometimes a betrothed man might design a quilt for his bride-to-be to make for their new home.

## CONCLUSION

Quilts are not only documents of history, they are also documents of love of the country, family and of love of self. The women's lives can be read by looking at their work. They put into their quilts what they were too shy or reserved to speak aloud: memories, aspirations, ambitions, love.

Quilts must have taken months, even years of work, and with their beautiful colors and designs, suggest their makers were women rich in both talent and joy, despite the difficulties of their lives. They testify to women's abilities to make art out of necessity, to create from salvaged bits of time and materials, and to convert the tyranny of sewing into an outlet of creative expression. Most present-day art critics agree that antique quilts were/are works of art. Some of them even think that quilts are the origin of collage and that they predate anything done by Picasso or Braque.

Feminist studies of our period have celebrated quilts as part of a women's tradition of creativity and as evidence of a female aesthetic sensibility. The adoption of the quilt as a medium by modern female American artists, may be appreciated as an act aiming at affirming and perpetuating a women's tradition of art. It was the feminist movement of the 1970's (along with the nostalgia craze of the Bicentennial) that fueled the current quilt revival. As women became more and more aware of the contributions of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers,

quilts were recognized as valuable records of their female ancestors' lives. They also realized that quilting was one way to preserve their own history.

Quilting bees could have been the starting point for the feminist movement; it is said that the activists gave speeches, to further the cause of giving women the vote, in church basements at quilting bees. They became sites of consciousness raising, organizing and the development of group solidarity. In the first place, bees afforded acceptable ways for socializing and friendship. For the quilters, this was often the only chance to talk about their family and marital problems, about the ups and downs of life. It was an opportunity to share their problems with one another, sometimes even solve them, to clear up possible misunderstandings and strike up beautiful friendships. There is some real eye-opening conversation when different generations of women get together and quilt and discuss men and life in general, along with lots of laughter.

Besides the stories which were/are told at bees, almost every quilt had a story to go with it, why it was made: a star (for good luck) appliquéd on a quilt made for a son when he went to war; a quilt made of a nightie and the christening gown of the deceased daughter, in memory of her... Fine stitching is not everything. A beautiful quilt is one made with someone special in mind. Only in that case can a quilt have heart. And soul... the soul of every quilt is the woman who made it, whether she signed it, dated it, or left its origin a mystery by doing neither. Even if those women are never known, their quilts survive as a testament that they lived and created.

Women quilted to leave their mark on the world; to leave something behind to prove that they lived, created and mattered in the world.

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## AMERIČKI *QUILT*\*

(Sažetak)

Stoljećima je rad iglom bio od ključnog značaja u životu američkih žena, i kao važan kućni posao i kao osnovno, možda jedino, sredstvo umjetničkog izražavanja.

U tekstu je riječ o posebnoj vrsti posteljnog pokrivača načinjenog od dva sloja tkanine između kojih je vuneno ili pamučno punjenje, a sve zajedno prošiveno je gustim bodom prema različitim motivima. Osim reljefnih motiva dobivenih samim prošivanjem, lice pokrivača najčešće nosi i motive stvorene sastavljanjem ili apliciranjem raznobojnih komadića tkanine (*patchwork*).

Ovi pokrivači, kako uporabna i umjetnička djela tako i vrijedni dokumenti, postali su predmetom proučavanja stručnjaka iz područja američkih studija, povijesti (umjetnosti) i ženskih studija.

\* Riječ ostavljamo u izvornom obliku, jer ni jedan prijevod (poplun, jorgan, pokrivač, pokrivač) ne bi bio potpuno vjeran.