

QUILTING — A TRADITION OF INGENUITY, IMAGINATION AND SKILL

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*"We used to make quilts from scraps, out of necessity. Now we make them real beautiful and fancy."
—70-year-old Mormon Woman
Santa Monica, California
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Quilting is a traditional American art form which continues to be a vital part of contemporary life. Quilts are to be found in every state of the union. Even Hawaiians have been making them since the 1820s. Whether for decoration or warmth, quilts have provided a vehicle for creative expression for centuries.

Quilting consists of joining two or more layers of fabric together by sewing through them. The first quilts, brought to this country by settlers from Western Europe, quickly wore out from constant use. Without imported goods or a native cloth industry, quilts were continually being repaired in a random fashion with scraps of old clothing. These were the first "crazy quilts." Though the early settlers must have had little time to be concerned with adornment, their early patchworks undoubtedly showed much aesthetic forethought.

By 1770, clipper ships were supplying the Eastern seaboard with bolts of imported cloth, and native-made fabric was readily available. As a result, those who could afford this fabric were able to make quilts out of "whole cloth." Others, particularly pioneer women, were forced to depend upon their own hand-woven fabric and scraps of commercially



Quilt makers from Booneville, Kentucky, work on a wind-mill pattern quilt. Photo by Jan Faul.

printed cotton which they lovingly saved and eventually pieced together to make patchwork quilts. These two trends in 18th-century quilting epitomize the major types of American quilts. The "whole cloth" quilts were either quilted counterpanes or appliqued quilts. The quilted counterpane, often white, was formed by sewing around the outline of the design which had been drawn on the top layer of the quilt. These designs were often padded or stuffed with cording. Some women simply quilted the patterns on the printed fabric. The appliqued—or laid-on—quilt was formed from pieces of material arranged in a pattern and sewn on a solid-colored background material. The appliqued quilt reached its height of popularity by 1850. Especially popular was the appliqued "Bride Quilt," made by a newly-engaged woman, incorporating hearts in an elaborate design.

The patchwork or pieced quilt, the classic American quilt, was made by sewing together small pieces of material in geometric patterns to form the quilt top. It was customary for an American girl to have made a dozen patchwork quilts by the time she reached marriageable age. Many patterns and arrangements of those patterns, as well as quilt names, were created. The enormous variation in quilt patterns is exemplified by the star patterns—of which there are more than 100 extant. One such variant was the Lone Star. Another popular pattern group was the Rose, the most common being the Rose of Sharon. Religion, occupations, politics, nature, and social activities influenced the names of the quilts. The materials used reflected changes in fashion and life experiences.

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"There is a heap of comfort in making quilts, just to sit and sort over the pieces and call to mind that this piece or that is of the dress of a loved friend." (Aunt Jane of Kentucky)

Album quilts, also known as friendship or presentation quilts, were a very special form of patchwork quilt. Pieced and signed blocks were donated by friends, sewn together at an album party, and presented to a friend upon marriage, or to a minister's wife or other honored person. The crazy quilt is another distinct type of patchwork quilt characterized by a random arrangement of different-sized patches. Superseded for a while by the patterned patchwork quilt, it was revived about 1800 in the couch throws made of silks, velvets, and satins with embroidered seams. There are other variations of patchwork quilts such as the yoyo, biscuit, and cathedral window. Tied quilts, made by tying individual threads to form the design rather than quilting, are also traditional.

By 1890 ready-made garments marked the end of quilting as a common household activity. Revivals occurred in 1915 and after both World Wars. The 1960's brought the strongest revival, however. Quilting never disappeared during the 20th century, but rather has been of varying importance for different groups of people. For some, quilts remained a necessity; for others, they were always a luxury.

As a record of ingenuity, imagination in design, and skill in craftsmanship, the quilt has always been highly recognized. Today, cooperatives such as the Martin Luther King Quilting Bee, Alberta, Alabama, are preserving this traditional art form and meeting the consumer demand for quilts. Church groups such as the Mennonites and guilds like the Mountain Mist Quilters Club often provide quilting services for individuals. These groups have much in common with the early quilting bees—the creative, sharing nature of every phase of the quilting process—from the trading of scraps and patterns, to the quilting at "bees" or parties, to the presentation of the quilt as a gift. Sources for patterns have certainly grown beyond word-of-mouth; the Mountain Blue Book of Quilts has provided patterns since 1846. Other sources include Aunt Martha's Studios Quilting Books, and *Quilter's Newsletter*. Patterns come in several forms: outline patterns on varying grades of white paper, perforated patterns for marking quilt tops; templates (patterns made from a durable material) traditionally of cardboard or tin and more recently, of plastic. Ready-made kits with the pieces pre-cut are also available.

Quilts have commonly been made with the use of either a quilting frame or a hoop. The backing is laid

down first; the batting, traditionally cotton (now available in dacron), is placed on top of it; the top, which has already been pieced or marked, is placed over the batting. All three layers are basted together (very closely if done off the frame). The quilting is done with short, running stitches which penetrate all three layers. "A beautiful quilt is one which has tiny stitches. You must quilt quite close; it's good to have a pattern with not more than a 2½ to 3" square left without quilting." (Louisa Ahlgrim, Santa Monica, Calif.) Mrs. Ahlgrim, when director of the quilting at her church's workday, had been known to bring quilt tops to meetings to teach young women in the group how to quilt and then take the quilts home and redo much of the sewing so that it would be perfect.

The edges of a quilt have always been finished in various ways. Trim or flounce can be added; the top and backing can be turned in so that they are flush with one another and then blind-stitched. The top or backing can be turned over one or the other to form a contrasting border.

That quilting remains a popular, widespread activity can be judged by the number of quilts still to be found at state fairs and quilt shows such as the one at Huronia County, Ontario, Canada each September. Quilts continue to be made because they provide necessary creative expression for both the individual and the community.

ELECTRIC BLANKETS—BEWARE!!

The luxuriously warm weight of the quilt is still to be reckoned with.

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