Listening to Herstory: A Short History of Quilting in the United States, 1620-Today

The history of quilts and quilting in America is rich and varied, influenced by many different ethnic groups and individual quilters. This “history” is, in fact, almost exclusively a “herstory”. If in fact the way a quilt is made tells the story of its maker and the times in which its maker lived, then in America, the stories told by quilts are usually women’s stories. Sometimes these stories, written in fabric not in words, are the only stories surviving of women who may have had no other voice or creative outlet.

1600s - First Colonists

The herstory of quilts in America starts with the very first colonists coming to this continent in the early 1600s, bringing with them the skills and styles of their European homelands. Most early settlers used woven blankets that were easier and less expensive to make or buy than quilts. Quilts were high-priced luxury items until after America became independent because they were elegant works made of fine materials. The dominant quilt style was a wholecloth background beautifully quilted with designs of flowers and feathers (wholecloth counterpanes) as a showcase of a lady’s fine handiwork.

1700s - Growing Cities

As cities in the colonies grew, a new class of rich tradespeople emerged who could afford fabrics imported from England. These quilters made wholecloth counterpanes, but they also made broderie perse quilts (a central medallion surrounded by a series of borders) and appliquéd chintz onto a background.

1800-1835 - The Country Expands

During the early 1800s, both pieced and appliquéd quilts usually were made in the broderie perse medallion style. They used large-scale cotton prints, often combining these with cotton, wool, or silk. Chintz appliqué remained popular as well. Soon, as America’s fledgling cloth industry started to produce, a flood of cheap and washable cottons unleashed new creativity in quilt making. Patchwork started to become a popular, and widespread style with such patterns as Nine-Patch, Irish Chain, Pinwheel, Sawtooth Star and Flying Geese.

When making a quilt, the top usually was pieced by one person, but the quilting often was done by a group of friends as quilting bees started to become popular around 1800. These parties were an important social activity: all of the stages of a woman’s life - girlhood, marriage, child raising, and death were shared with the women of her community over the quilting frame. Sewing and needlework were also the basis of a girl’s educations they were fundamental skills for being a wife and mother.

New opportunities for Americans to move westward came with the Louisiana Purchase around 1835, an event that doubled the size of the young United States and
began the continental expansion. Pioneer women had to leave a lot behind, but family quilts were justified as bedding, and later cherished as souvenirs of another way of life. Signature quilts, especially, were prized as symbolizing ties to distant family and friends.

**1840-1860 - Before the Civil War**

Quilt patterns often were named to honor a famous person or to make strong political statements. Between 1840 and 1860, women began to use quilts to raise funds, and to make statements of friendship, politics, or social values. Quilts were raffled off to support the abolitionist cause before the war. In the anti-slavery hotbed of the Northeast, a lot of quilt patterns reflected politics, such as Clay’s choice, Underground Railroad, Log Cabin, and Whig’s Defeat.

Album quilts (mostly appliqué) became popular as friendship gifts. Too time consuming to be practical, appliqué became the hallmark of a lady of leisure. To own an appliqué quilt was a statement of affluence and prestige. Girls learned to sew at an early age and usually had a handful of quilts by age 10 or 11. Completion of a fancy wedding quilt around age 16 proved a girl’s readiness to marry and was used as a best quilt her whole life. Chintz appliqué and wholecloth quilts died out during this time. The sewing machine was invented in 1846 and was common by 1870.

Some of the best appliqué album quilts from this time were made on plantations by slaves and mistresses. Quilts and quilting parties were important to slaves as bedding for their meager beds and as social occasions. Quilting parties were excuses to get together, gossip, socialize, and court. Quilts were not only used for warmth, but were an important part of slave baptism, marriage, and funeral rites. Often, slaves hid African designs and religious symbols such as coffins and crosses in their master’s quilts as a way to hold on to their African past.

For their own quilts, slaves used thrown away scraps, thrums (ends of threads left on master’s looms), feed sacks, raw cotton, and wool, whatever they could get their hands on of. A few slaves earned extra money by making quilts, some even enough to buy their own freedom. Slaves had to do lots of chores, even on their own time, but they still managed to produce surplus quilts. Men and boys quilted too, as well as knitting, crocheting, and weaving. All chores were divided up equally among the household members, with some female slaves becoming expert blacksmiths and carpenters. In most cases, quilts are the only surviving voices of historically invisible individuals the only record of their creativity, life, and thought: a record written not in words, but in feelings.

Soon the hardships of the Civil War and the isolation of the distant prairies ended the pre-war widespread affluence among whites.

**1860s - The Civil War**

When the Civil War began in 1861, many men left home to go to war, while the women left behind gathered over the comfort of quilting bees to share their loneliness and
fears. These women also mobilized to make bedding, clothes, and bandages for soldiers, and to sell quilts to get money for other supplies.

Those going west, however, left the war behind as The Homestead Act of 1862 guaranteed farmers free land in newly acquired territories, and log cabins began to dot the plains. The Log Cabin block dates from Lincoln’s 1860 presidential campaign. In this pattern, red center squares represent the hearth as the center of the cabin, yellow centers symbolize candles in the cabin windows, and a quilt with black center squares often was hung on a clothesline to symbolize a safehouse on the underground railroad. In addition to the Log Cabin pattern, Courthouse Steps, Straight Furrows, and Barn Raising made their debut during this time. The Pineapple pattern also emerged as a variation of the Log Cabin Block that reminded women of refinement and luxury, as the pineapple was a traditional symbol of hospitality back East.

During the war, many quilts were lost: in the south to looting and burning, in the north to donation to the war effort. Thousands of men who had moved to the new midwest states and western territories left to join the fight. Many pioneer wives who had not wanted to go West at all, now faced life alone in dark woods filled with constant danger.

Late 1800’s - After the War

Times were hard after the war. The South was in shambles and the North struggled with bank failures, labor disputes, and a growing class of urban poor. Opportunity lay to the west. But now in the late 1800s (after 1865), the railroad made it a lot easier to go West than traveling by covered wagon. Towns started to grow up around the railroad stations that dotted the plains. The general stores usually carried an array of cheap, pretty calicoes that soon brightened the frame houses as quilts. During this time, the patchwork quilt made of remnants, odds, and ends remained popular as a way to use up old scraps. Patchwork quilting is a purely American phenomenon developed as thrifty women used up scraps to make quilts that were both practical and beautiful. When Texas became a state, the Texas Star pattern emerged to commemorate its formation. Patriotic quilts also became popular in the 1870s as red, white, and blue, stars, and eagles appeared often.

Rural fairs also became popular as people needed a break from their chores, and fairs usually offered quilt contests and prizes. Quilting bees and county fairs remained social highlights through the late 1800s. In 1872, the Sears and Roebuck catalog came out with mail order quilt patterns, so patterns spread and became copied universally like never before.

During the Victorian Period of the late 1800s, a lady of prosperity was expected to make elaborate quilts with lace, ribbon, ruffles, and fringe to decorate the Victorian parlor. Crazy quilts were made with delicate and fragile fabrics, and embellished with sentimental messages and momentos of ribbons and cloth. Nearly useless as quilts, they served as elegant ornaments in the jumble of the Victorian home.
**1920s - 1930s - Prosperity and Equality**

Huge changes occurred in America during the 1920s as a rural, farm-based society changed into an industrial society built around cities. Women secured the right to vote, and washing machines, electricity, gas, telephones, sewing machines, motion pictures, and radio all liberated women from household drudgery. The Sears catalog also came out with more time-saving quilting devices, and nationwide publication of quilt patterns and columns in newspapers further exposed quilters to new ideas. To reconcile themselves to the frightening aspects of such rapid change, quilters looked to the past, taking out old quilts or making new ones in past styles. Quilts made during this time, however, tended to have scalloped edges and used pastel colors, as opposed to the hard lines and strong colors of the 1880s.

**1930-1965 - The Depression, World War II, and Postwar Prosperity**

Most Depression-made quilts were pretty, pastel, and skillful, despite the hard times in which they were made. Women who had come to rely on the ready-made conveniences offered during the 1920’s, could no longer afford them. For them, the Depression meant relearning old skills such as hand quilting. This resurgence of interest in quilting died out, however, by 1941. During World War II, women went to work, then turned their attention to babies, fin-tailed cars, and anything new during the prosperous 1950s and dearly 1960s.

**1965-present**

Since quilting went out of style during the 1950s and 1960s, those quilters wishing to revive it in the late 1960s found only fabric that, though cheap, was polyester, double knit, or garishly patterned and colored. The centennial of 1976 saw a flurry of patriotic and red, white, and blue quilts. Eventually, during the 1980s, pretty 100% cottons especially made for quilting began to reappear as interest in quilting peaked. New magazines also started appearing during this time, along with rotary cutters and plastic templates. In the 1990s, for the first time, quilts were hung on the wall and treated as art. Today, art quilts sometimes mimic the brushstrokes of famous paintings by such authors as Matisse, Monet, Klimt, Chagall, and VanGogh. Other art quilts include Kaleidoscope, fractured landscape, and stained glass. Also at the present time, quilt making is used still as a remembrance of friends, a political forum, and a fund raising opportunity, such as the massive AIDS NAMES quilt, and the raffling of quilts to support Project Breakthrough, a breast cancer research fund.

*What comes next in the herstory of quilting? Discuss this with your class.*