

Often thought of as the traditional Early American symbol of domestic life, the patchwork quilt was a prime indicator of the growing textile industry, both at home and abroad. Colonial Americans borrowed from the traditions of their former homelands, and, as England tightened its control over the colonies and the Revolutionary War quickly approached, began creating their own unique textile techniques which eventually helped to form an embodiment of American culture, the quilt.

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the seeds of the fast-approaching Industrial Revolution had been sown and the Revolution's first success, the textile industry, was beginning to take off. Fine wools and linens could be rapidly produced thanks to the recent development of the fly shuttle (John Kay 1733), the spinning jenny (1760s), and the water frame (Richard Arkwright 1769) which was employed in multiple spinnings of many threads (Palmer 431). For fancier and more exotic textiles, England turned to their long-standing colony, India, world-renowned for their chintzes and calicos (i.e. painted/printed cottons patterned with a small motif in several colors).

Beginning in the 1620s, British citizens began the great exodus from the "Old World" to the freedom and adventure of the Americas. Many believe that the reasons for this exodus were based on the need for a new start or religious freedom. However, "the most important motivation for encouraging the settlement of the colonies was to provide a new market for English products, particularly English textiles" (Kiracofe 90). Trade was an integral part of early colonial life and certain regions of Colonial America had closer ties with the Old World than others.

Although some trade with the mother country was completed through the exchange of hard currency, Britain, in most instances, retained the mercantilist economy, which was a standard tie between a colony and its parent. Britain's growing obsession with the furthering of their textile monopoly caused priority raw materials to be products used in the production of fine textiles, such as flax, wool, and cotton.

"As long as weaving was confined to the needs of the individual householder, the industry was tolerated and even encouraged by the parent country, but when it attained such proportions as to menace colonial trade, as it seemingly did toward the close of the seventeenth century, England, sensing the danger, immediately established measures restricting its further development" (Little 7). In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, England increasingly turned towards taxing the colony in a vain attempt to prevent the Americas from becoming self-dependent. Starting in 1650 with the Navigation Acts, England placed high duties on goods whose production they wished to discourage. Typically this was achieved by restraints on equipment exports, thus severely impairing the colonies' ability to produce at home. As more acts were levied, fierce patriotism gripped the new world and local artisans and craftsman began producing full throttle. By 1750 90% of Pennsylvania farmers "fabricated their own wearing apparel" (Kiracofe 56) and "as a token of support to home industry, the Harvard graduating class of 1768 appeared to a man dressed in black cloth made from Rhode Island wool" (Orlofsky 57).

The growing feelings of nationhood provided an incredible impetus for quilting. Ties to England were rapidly disintegrating and the local textile industry held a position above all others. Colonial America realized the importance of an assimilation of the

varied backgrounds of colonists and the need for a unique American culture. The final product of these growing feelings and goals was the American quilt.

There are several misconceptions about the objectives of early quilts – they were not designed for warmth; “a significant number of late eighteenth century American quilts are not warm at all, containing as they do only the minimum amount of filling to show off the quilting. The ‘need’ for American women to make handsome quilts does not seem to be either economic or practical.” (Garoutte qtd. in Kiracofe 47). No quilts made before 1700 are known to survive and those remaining from the eighteenth century were likely created for ceremonial purposes and thus served no practical purpose. Surviving quilts are likely the result of ceremonial occasion and “the majority were made from new fabrics purchased specifically for the quilt, to form decorative floral centers, lively borders, unified pieced patterns, or interesting motifs for an appliquéd assemblage” (Kiracofe 48).

Very few pre-Victorian quilts used in daily life survive today. “Pieced from materials that not infrequently had already seen their best days in the form of clothing, the family quilt was like the turkey soup made from the leftovers of the Christmas feast – a positively last appearance” (Finley 23). The development of many quilting styles, such as patchwork and appliqué, came from this need to use every scrap of the Christmas turkey.

Specific location within the colony had a huge impact on the appearance of new quilts both in terms of coloring and design, for “materials and colors used in the making of quilts were basically a product of customs of dress” (Orlofsky 27). “New England quilts of the period reflect the diversity of fabric (“several blues, greens, reds, scarlet,

purple, and all sorts of browns and butternuts available to the colonists, as well as the much loved calicoes and Indian chintzes that were all the rage in England” (Kiracofe 53)) as well as its high price; fabric was treated with great respect, and unless they were to be used for *broderie perse*, fabric panels were generally kept whole” (Kiracofe 53).

Southern quilts, due to the greater wealth of the region, were often more ornate and similar to other quilts from the region. Some believe in addition to the greater wealth of the region, the quilts are more complex and decorative because “there was more time available for white women to pursue needlework when slaves assumed many of the household chores” (Allen qtd. in Horton 27). Southern colonists traditionally wore garb of amazing quality. For example, the typical gentleman planter of Virginia is described as wearing “a suit of colored light velvet, silk stockings, and a felt hat adorned with embroidery and plumes” (Orlofsky 30).

The mid-Atlantic had a large Dutch population and the Dutch tradition for colorful quilted petticoats and the traditional quilted cap lent itself easily to the unique quilting style of this region. Colorful dyes marked the clothing style and this description provides a vivid image of both the culture and its quilts:

The Dutch housewife's costume was typically a petticoat of linsey-woolsey striped with a variety of brilliant dyes, covered by gowns described as uniformly gay, covered again by a long white apron of homespun linen, and topped by a waistcoat made of red and blue printed linen, with sleeves of red and yellow patterned cloth (Orlofsky 32).

The first image that often comes to mind upon the mention of quilts is the now-standard patchwork quilt; that is, a quilt constructed from geometric pieces of fabric sewn together into a greater design. The mantra of colonial times, to conserve everything, was powerfully evident in early American quilts. The first design technique

employed whole block quilts which involved keeping individual pieces of fabric whole and showing off the craftsmanship of the fabric via quilting. The most intricate example of this style is known as "all whites", in which all-white pieces of fabric were turned into fashionable quilts with designs often classical in nature, reflecting the time. However, "white work artists did not limit themselves to themes of classical nature; the ever-popular motifs of the Indian palampores, such as vines and a central tree with flower-laden boughs, are found in the all-white quilts as well." (Kiracofe 64).

The other popular style of the time, the medallion quilt *broderie perse*, also highlighted American's feelings towards prized pieces of fabric. Like "all white" and whole block quilts, fabric was kept in an intact panel as much as possible. Central in the *broderie perse* style was usually a piece of fine Indian calico or chintz, likely passed down through several generations, and surrounding this centerpiece were smaller pieces of scrap fabric reflecting the coloring and pattern of the medallion.

"In many examples, the format of the quilt follows the medallion style, and the mosaic formed by the random arrangement of the blocks takes the place of the formal borders of the quilt." (Kiracofe 69). This gradual progression from fabric conversation to the unique American style of the patchwork quilt was clearly reflected in the changing trends of textile production. After the fight for independence, the Industrial Revolution completely changed the industry and with it, quilts.

Bibliography

Colton, Joel , Lloyd S. Kramer, and R R. Palmer. A History of the Modern World. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002.

Finley, Ruth E. Old Patchwork Quilts. Newton Centre: Charles T. Branford Company, 1929.

Kiracofe, Roderick. The American Quilt. New York: Clarkson Potter, 1993.

Little, Frances. Early American Textiles. New York: Century Company, 1931.

Orlofsky, Myron, and Patsy Orlofsky. Quilts in America. New York: Abbeville P, 1992.

Quilting in America: Beyond the Myths. Ed. Laurel Horton. Nashville: Rutledge Hill P, 1994.