

AN HISTORIC QUILT DOCUMENT THE LADIES ART COMPANY CATALOG

I read with astonishment a statement about LADIES ART COMPANY (LAC) CATALOG in a recent, privately published quilt book. It characterized the LAC CATALOG as "simply an old catalog of quilt patterns from the early 1900's." This statement mixes absurdity with untruth. The LAG CATALOG does not date from the early 1900's. As to its merit, this slim volume is regarded by most quilt scholars as an historic quilt document.

The LAC of St. Louis, MO was founded in 1889. Although it was a commercial venture, the compilation of hundreds of quilt patterns represented a research effort of major proportions. The LAG did not create the quilt patterns. They did more. Theirs was the first attempt to collect the many quilt patterns that American women had devised since the beginning of our country. Quilt patterns had appeared in print prior to the advent of the LAC. Quilt patterns were published in periodicals, fancy-work manuals, almanacs, and farm papers--two or three at a time! Very often, the quilt patterns in these sources were unnamed, or simply called "patchwork," or the more obvious, "a pretty quilt block." Not only did the company assemble this large collection of quilt patterns, they made a conscious effort to assign each pattern its authentic name in common usage at that time.

The first LAC CATALOGS were called DIAGRAMS OF QUILT, SOFA AND PIN CUSHION PATTERNS, and they were continually revised. Most of the early revisions consisted of enlarging the catalog with the acquisition of additional quilt patterns. In 1898 the LAC CATALOG contained 420 quilt patterns. In 1907 it contained 450 patterns. In 1920 the catalog seemed to undergo extensive reworking. There were 500 quilt patterns, but approximately 10 patterns were deleted. And the title changed to the now familiar one, QUILT PATTERNS--PATCHWORK AND APPLIQUE.

Why were patterns deleted? LAC was a commercial venture, and it is very likely the deleted patterns were probably poor sellers. However, aesthetics also seem to have played a part in the decision. The owners of LAC stated they wondered why an excised pattern, #314 Mouse "had ever been in the catalog in the first place." Mouse is a perfect example of the realistic type of quilt pattern Ruth Finley* used to illustrate deterioration of quilt design in the late 1990's, and which she characterized as "bizarre."

The 1928 edition of the LAC CATALOG was the final edition which contained any revisions--additions or deletions. The pattern number was stabilized at 530. Only cosmetic changes occurred in subsequent editions after 1928, such as changed physical dimensions of the book or block arrangement per page or pagination.

Through the years, LAC CATALOG has been used as a reference by authors, researchers, collectors and other commercial quilt pattern sources. Dr. Wm. Rush Dunton** devoted part of his text to LAC nomenclature. Carrie Hall*** acknowledged her use of the company in the forward. Alice Beyer**** listed this source, Marie D. Webster's***** famous list of quilt patterns in the back of her book is practically synonymous with the quilt pattern names in the LAG CATALOG. Pattern-producing sources, such as Nancy Page, Kansas City Star, and Nancy Cabot appeared to have dipped liberally in this "fountain of knowledge." So much of their work is identical with the work of their predecessor--the LAC.

When we think of the paucity of printed material available to LAG when they began their undertaking in the late 1880's, their accomplishment is even more impressive. They had none of the advantages researchers have today--many newspaper morgues, available library stacks, or convenient tools, such as files of bound READER'S GUIDE TO PERIODICAL LITERATURE and indexes, no end.

THE LADIES ART COMPANY CATALOG
(continued from page 13)

Instead, this German immigrant family in St. Louis, started a commercial operation which required that they amass hundreds of authentic quilt patterns devised by American women, and publish the designs in one volume. It was a massive project and they were equal to the task.

For many years now, knowledgeable quilt scholars have understood that the LAC CATALOG holds the same place in the quilt catalog field that Ruth Finley does in the quilt textual field--Number One

As the years have passed, it is true, we have acquired additional information not recorded by LAC. Yet, that does not negate, in any way, LAC's contribution. In truth, no single source could ever match LAC because they were the first to assemble a quilt pattern collection of this magnitude. And as the first major collection of quilt patterns in print, the LAG CATALOG must surely be considered an Historic quilt document.

--Cuesta Benberry--
St. Louis, Missouri

*Finley, Ruth E. OLD PATCHWORK QUILTS AND THE WOMEN WHO MADE THEM. Newton Centre, MA: Charles T. Bradford Company, 1970.

**Dunton, Wm. Rush, Jr., M.D. OLD QUILTS. Published by the author at 333 N. Symington Ave., Catonsville, MD, 1946.(continued)

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Does anyone have copies of the Scalamadre Museum publications by John Kent Kent Tilton entitled ROSE AS A MOTIF, TULIP AS A MOTIF, 200 YEARS OF TEXTILE DESIGNS, or A HISTORY OF COLOR AS USED IN TEXTILES? Please let us hear from you.

***Hall, Carrie A. and Rose Kretsinger. THE ROMANCE OF THE PATCHWORK QUILT IN AMERICA. Caidwell, ID: Caxton Printers, Ltd., Bonanza Books, 1935.

****Beyer, Alice. QUILTING. Chicago, IL: South Park Commissioners, 1934.

*****Webster, Marie D. QUILTS, THEIR STORY AND HOW TO MAKE THEM. Doubleday Page Co., 1915. (Tudor Publishing Co., 1948.)

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DIAGRAMS OF QUILT, SOFA, AND PIN CUSHION PATTERNS, 9th revised edition, 1898.
QUILT PATTERNS--PATCHWORK AND APPLIQUE, 1922 Edition, 1928 Edition, 1970 Edition.

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