

The Development of Crazy Quilts

Victorian Crazy Quilts are so unique among the different kinds of patchwork quilts that everyone "knows" exactly what they are. Yet, when one begins looking through books at quilts labeled "Crazy Quilts," one discovers that not every quilt called by that name is a true Crazy Quilt.

When we consider the appearance of Crazy Quilts, the main elements we think of are: (1) irregular shaped patches and (2) embroidery. But many quilts, pieced or otherwise, have embroidery embellishing their surfaces. And many Crazy Quilts are not embroidered at all. So it is only the irregular patches which determine that it is a Crazy Quilt.

CRAZY PATCHWORK IN ENGLAND

The primary factor of irregular shapes has led me to wonder whether the name Crazy came from England, where a kind of irregular flagstone paving is called crazy paving. In England, a usual meaning of crazy or crazed is "having a crackled appearance." However, when Crazy Patchwork first appeared in England, it wasn't called by that name. It was called Puzzle Patchwork by Caulfield and Seward in 1882(1) and Japanese Patchwork in Weldon(c.1885).(2) Two references in the OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY show that the term Crazy Patchwork was used in 1885 in HARPERS MAGAZINE, and in 1886 in the PALL MALL GAZETTE, although the latter referred to American Crazy Quilts!

Inquiry in England has turned up the information that museum curators and quilt authors there all agree that Crazy Patchwork began in America. Current British references generally make the same statement. Crazy Patchwork was definitely made in England in the Victorian era, but apparently not to the same extent as in America. There are only a few examples of Crazy Quilts still in existence in England. One date-inscribed 1888 is in the Worthing Museum, (3) and another date-inscribed 1884 is in the Folk Art

Museum at St. Fagan's, Wales-- but that one was made in America. (4) Some English authorities have said that the earliest Crazy Quilt was made in 1830, but there is no evidence of that.

In England, small articles of Crazy Patchwork, such as cushions, tea cozies, and sewing kits were more likely to be made than were quilts or sofa-throws.

AMERICAN CRAZY PATCHWORK

In American publications the references go back somewhat further. The earliest which have come to my attention are in two small paragraphs in the CULTIVATOR & COUNTRY GENTLEMEN of March and November, 1878. These both refer to a mode of embroidering "crazy cushions." The instructions given in November read:

"Buy a square of embroidery canvas. Give it to your circle of friends, asking them to pass it around, each one working what she pleases and where she pleases. When it comes back to you, you will think it a 'crazy' cushion, indeed. Fill it in with some dark color that will bring the figures out to the best advantage. If you are as fortunate as I have been, and get nothing in that is ungainly in proportion, homely in colors, or badly worked, you are to be congratulated."

The next printed reference is from the same magazine dated four years later--August 24, 1882. In a short piece titled "Bessie's Silk Patchwork," Bessie is described as a farm wife making a "crazy patch" quilt, embroidering small designs on silk scraps in her moments of waiting time. It would appear from this description that Crazy Quilts were already in full bloom in 1882.

It was nearly a year later-- June, 1883--that the first ads for "Crazy Quilt silks" (fabric and embroidery silks) began to appear in the fashionable magazines such as PETERSON'S and HARPER'S BAZAR.(5)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRAZY QUILTS (con'd)

Silk manufacturing was at its prime in the U.S. during this and the following decade. In 1880 the value of domestic silk manufacturing was equal to that of the imported product, and by 1890 the domestic silk produced was twice the value of the imports. Manufacturers had every incentive to encourage the use of their product, and they advertised lavishly for the times. Crazy Quilts were only one of the many varieties of silk patchwork being made in this era. A popular instruction booklet, LADIES MANUAL OF FANCY WORK by Jenny June, published by the A.L. Burt Co. of New York in 1883, was advertised for sale for 50 in HARPER'S BAZAR of 1884, and offered as a subscription premium by GOOD HOUSEKEEPING in 1885. "500 illustrations, 96 pages," it had quite a number of silk patchwork designs, but none of them were Crazy Patchwork.

The Victorian era being such a time of silks, velvets and brocades, both in clothing and furnishings, it is usual to think that Crazy Quilts were always made of those fabrics, and probably most of them were made of "fancy goods." Certainly the ads offering variegated silk scraps for sale gave women an opportunity they might not otherwise have to work with a variety of luxurious fabrics--even if only in sample sizes. Elaborate Crazy Quilts were never intended to be practical, and-- as Cuesta Benberry pointed out in NIMBLE NEEDLE TREASURES, Summer, 1973 (p.3)--most of them were destined for use in the parlor as sofa throws or table covers. Relatively few of the elaborate Crazy Quilts were full bed size.

The Crazy Quilts which are full bed size are more likely to have been made of wool or cotton. And they are less likely to be lavishly embellished. These plainer bed-size Crazy Quilts appear to have been made concurrently with the fancy parlor throws.

The earliest dated Crazy Quilt of either kind which I have come across is one made

of simple printed cottons in the collection of Thos.K. Woodard. It is prominently dated 1882.(6) This is a particularly interesting Crazy Quilt; given its early date, it has a very finished look to it. It does not look tentative or exploratory as one might expect in an early venture into a design.

This cotton quilt, the description of Bessie's silk patchwork, and a picture of Puzzle Patchwork in the DICTIONARY OF NEEDLEWORK(1) are all from the year 1882, which strongly suggests that Crazy Quilts were a well-recognized design by that time. But before that year, the documented record is still blank.

(There is a Crazy Quilt in the King's County Museum, New Brunswick, Canada, with an embroidered date of 18607) However, this date commemorates the date of the Confederation Conference at Quebec, as the silks in the quilt are from the ball gowns worn at that event. The stitchery on the quilt indicates that it was made much later than the date on it.)

THE EMBELLISHMENTS

Even though embroidery does not define a Crazy Quilt, it was so often a part of them in the Victorian age that it should also be considered. Once the basic idea of irregular patches was established, the further development came through embellishments and variations. This went hand-in-hand with the production of new silk needlework novelties and the invention of new stitches.

The rather linear embroidery of the Colonial and Revolutionary eras had gone out of fashion with the introduction of canvas-work or Berlin-work from England around 1840. Berlin-work then became the prevailing mode until in the 1880's. Some of these counted designs were worked in silk, especially on small items such as bookmarks and needle books.

At the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876, there was a display of the new English "Art Needlework" from the Royal School of Art Needlework in Kensington.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRAZY QUILTS (*con'd*)

American women began to take up this freer kind of needlework on cloth which became known as Kensington work. Characteristically, this embroidery is a kind of "needle painting," with flowers, birds, animals and plants being treated naturalistically with an emphasis on delicate shadings. Many motifs such as pansies, iris, cat-tails, herons, etc., used on Crazy Quilts are examples of Kensington work.

In the 1870's also, there was a vogue for "fancy work"--the making of various decorative and presumably useful items--using silk ribbon, chenille, felt and the like. These techniques too were later applied to Crazy Quilts.

The one technique which is almost synonymous with Crazy Patchwork is that of ornamental stitches. The edges of the patches, in the early years of the work, were held down by blanket stitches or very simple feather stitches. Early in the 1880's, these holding stitches began to be elaborated and varied to the point where they became a major part of the embellishment of the fancier quilts. Most of these stitches have to be worked as repeats in a row to be effective, and so are particularly suitable for the many edges in Crazy Patchwork.

A fourth design convention frequently found on Crazy Quilts uses an outline stitch to create line drawings of familiar objects--spider webs, Kate Greenaway figures, animals, hats, umbrellas, etc. Patterns and stamping kits for these designs were sold widely in the 1880's, as were pre-stamped silk patches.

A fifth technique was that of "Kensington painting." In this, tube paints were brushed directly on the fabric in direct imitation of Kensington embroidery. Generally, the "Art Needlework" subjects were depicted--pansies, cat-tails, etc.-- but some artists branched out into portraits and even landscapes.

The vogue for Crazy Quilts, a truly Victorian development, lasted well into the 20th century. It seems to have stirred up a variety of reactions, including satirical verse. There has been quite a lot of light verse written about quilts--

though not about other needlework. Most of it has been in a fond, sentimental tone. Only Crazy Quilts have inspired satire as well as offended comments from proper needlework authorities. But it would seem that Victorian era women were having a lot of fun with their needles and could care less about what the authorities thought. Better than swooning, better than nervous breakdowns, better than gin or patent medicines, Crazy Quilts were American women's answer to the constrictions of the Victorian age.

--Sally Garoutte--
Textile Editor

(1) Sophia Frances Ann Caulfeild and Blanche C. Saward, *THE DICTIONARY OF NEEDLEWORK*, L. Upcott Gill, London, 1382, P. 384. (Facsimile edition, Arno Press, New York, 1972.)

(2) Barbara M. Morris, *VICTORIAN EMBROIDERY*, New York, Universe Books, 1970, p. 66.

(3) Fiona Clark and Dorothea Nield, "The Costume Gallery at Worthing," *EMBROIDERY*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Winter 1977, p. 118.

(4) Avril Colby, *PATCHWORK QUILTS*, New York, Scribners, 1965, p. 70.

(5) Kathryn D. Christopherson, "19th Century Craze for Crazy Quilts," *QUILTERS' JOURNAL*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring 1978, p. 9.

(6) Robert Bishop, *NEW DISCOVERIES IN AMERICAN QUILTS*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1975, p. 116.

(7) Mary Conroy, *300 YEARS OF CANADA'S QUILTS*, Toronto, Griffin House, 1976, plate 9.

Note: I am deeply indebted to Cuesta Benberry, Carol Crabb, and Kathryn Christopherson for providing me with primary information which culminated in this article.

We have received many original and interesting business cards. We thought it would be fun to share some of them, so from time to time we will be running one or two of them. If any of you have a card you would like to share please send it along to Box 270, Mill Valley CA 94941

