

PENNSYLVANIA PILLOWCASES

Patricia Long teaches the History and Techniques of Quilting to undergraduates and graduates at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Her Pennsylvania German background and an early exposure to an antique dealer who loved antique textiles prompted her to make this study.

This is a report of an initial study of pillow cases, bolsters, and shams from Pennsylvania made during the years from 1830-1930. The 55 cases or sets of cases observed in this study were made using techniques of piecing, appliqueing, quilting, stuffed work, and whole cloth printed fabrics. The 55 examples used are the beginning of a projected study of 200-300 cases or sets of cases.

I hope, in this study, to raise some questions about a kind of early textile that has so far gone unnoticed in the literature of quilt-making and historical quilts. An article written by Lillian Baker Carlisle in Antiques Magazine April 1969, and an article written by Ada F. Robacker in Antique Collecting August 1978, comprise the only written information I was able to find on this subject.

Pieced and appliqued pillow cases appear to be a singularly regional variation of bedding found in Pennsylvania and made in Pennsylvania. The period when most were made-- the middle to late 19th century--coincided with a peak period of quilt production and of highly developed hand-sewing techniques. The pillow cases that I have seen are the products of highly skilled crafting of piecing, appliqueing, quilting, stuffed work and embroidery. The pieced and appliqued designs follow a wide range of block designs, and like the quilts which they may have been constructed to match, reflect the individuality of their makers. The examples that I report were in surprisingly good condition.

Many of these pillow cases were designed using a small scale of blocks, appropriate to the size of the cases. The smallest scale set that I found incorporated 35 pieced stars, 2 3/4 inches square, each block containing 17 pieces. The stars were set together with alternating plain blocks and used an insert of handmade ric rac pieced insertion of the same fabric as the stars. It was finished by a plain hemmed border in an overall dimension of 17 3/4 inches by 28 1/2 inches. Another interesting feature of this set was that it was one set of two matching sets made by sisters from Manheim, Pa. and

marked in red, thread count cross stitch embroidery with the initials M. H. (Maria Hershey) and E. H. in the mid 19th century.

Other period designs found were nine patch, four patch, five grid designs, baskets, mariner's compass, king's crown, reel, windmill, bow tie, birds in flight, and various stars--sawtooth, LeMoyne, feathered, variable, blazing, and lone. Appliqued designs include several rose, rose of sharon, tulip, grape, cherries, and fleur de lis. Of the 55 cases or sets of cases, 35 were pieced, 8 were appliqued, 4 were whole cloth printed fabrics, 2 were stuffed work shams, and 6 were square pillows, 4 of which were pieced and 2 were appliqued. The square pillows were more likely made for a chair than for bedding.

As an indication of the special nature of these cases, and the esteem with which they may have been regarded, six were embroidered with the dates, 1852, 1842, 1857, 1869, 1828, and 1840. Of these six that were dated, one case 1869 contained only the date, two sets of cases, 1852 and 1842, were marked also with letters. The remaining four, 1857 and 1828, both pairs, and 1832 and 1840, both singles, were embroidered with a name also. Five other cases or sets of cases were embroidered with initials, usually in thread count cross stitch, of the kind used in marking bed linens during this period.

The provenance of some of these cases is known with reasonable certainty. All of the cases were found in the areas of eastern Pennsylvania which include Lancaster, Lancaster County, Myerstown, Richland, Lebanon County, Manheim, Hanover, East Berlin, Reading, and Germantown.

The cases range in size from 15-19 inches wide, to 24-30 inches long. The square pillows had a variation of from 18-22 inches square and the long bolsters were approximately 57 inches in length.

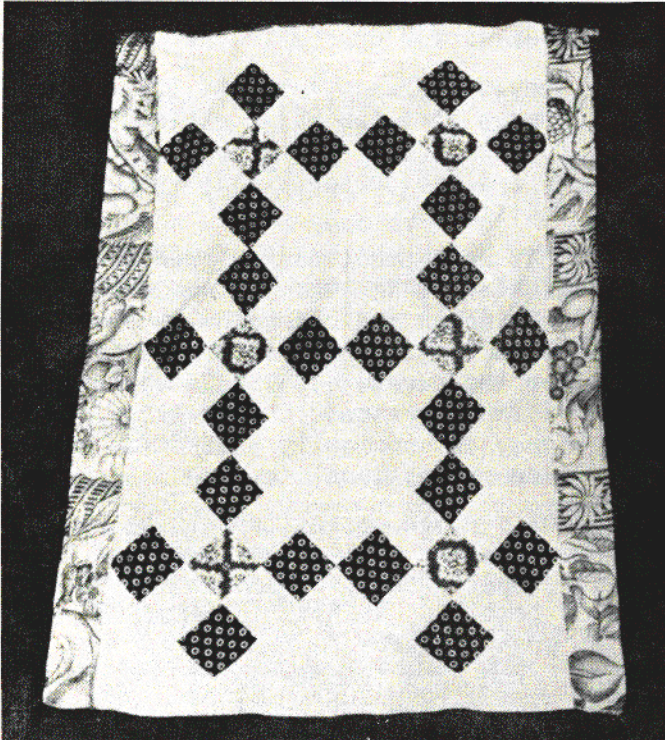
A variety of edgings and closings were used in the construction of these cases. The most common closing found in 26 examples was a rolled hem which was stitched on each side of the opening for 1-2 inches. Nine examples had tapes or ties attached to the center of the open end, three more pairs had buttons and handmade buttonholes, four had an edging of fringe or lace, two pairs had an insertion of hand pieced ric rac, and three pairs had a ruffle on the top side of the case.

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Most cases were constructed with backstitch, fewer were done with running stitch, three pairs used some machine stitching and one early twentieth century pair was completely machine stitched. Six of the pieced examples were lined and one pair of the whole cloth printed cases was lined. Quilting was used on the top side of three pieced cases and one appliqued example and one unusual pair was both pieced and quilted on both sides of the cases.



One interesting set of appliqued cases was found with a matching quilt. In another instance, a square appliqued case and a matching quilt were located in the same town.

While many of the pillow cases were seamed on the sides, a common variation was for the front of the design to be folded over to the back for an inch or two and seamed on the back. Similarly, some back fabrics were brought an inch or two to the front, and seamed to form a border on the front.

Of the 55 examples of cases I examined, 33 were pairs, 22 were singles. Six of the single ones were square and not likely to be made as a pair.

Perhaps more questions have been raised than answered in this sample of 55 examples. Were these cases always made to match a special quilt? Were they made for special bedding such

as bridal quilts? Would this explain the good condition of those examples that exist? Were they made in other areas than Pennsylvania? Might this custom have migrated west with Pennsylvania settlers? How frequently were they used with a matching bolster case?

Although collectors have been attracted to pieced and appliqued cases for years, many people who live in the area where these cases originate are unaware of their existence. Perhaps with more interest in these rare textiles more examples will be found and more light will be shed on their origins.

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