

Hawaiian Quilts

by Joyce Gross

Hawaiian quilts are enjoying a new popularity on the mainland as well as in the islands. A new one brings a handsome price and it is almost impossible to find an old one for sale. But the price alone is not what makes them so special. Hawaiians cherish their quilts and do not like to let them out of their possession. Even such a prestigious exhibit as the 1973 Honolulu Academy of Arts exhibit "The Quilt - A Hawaiian Heritage" had trouble borrowing the old inherited quilts. Indeed, one person closely connected with the exhibit remarked, "In some ways it was harder to put this exhibit together than one of Ming vases because the Hawaiians value their quilts so highly."

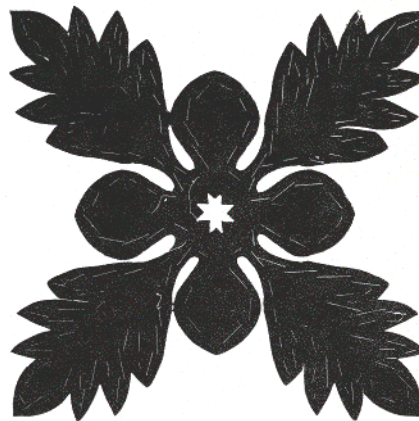


APPLIQUED QUILT TOP (Author's collection) orange on white, ca. 1880. Note similarity to Pennsylvania motifs. Photo E. Gross

There are several versions of the origin of the Hawaiian quilt. Napua Stevens relates one in her book * which tells of a group of women sewing under a breadfruit tree. The sun was shining through the leaves and fruit making a silhouette. One woman returned to

*Stevens, Napua. *THE HAWAIIAN QUILT*. 1971

her home and made the pattern. I have heard a slightly different version. A young woman was on the beach at sundown when the sun cast a shadow of a coconut palm on the sand.



(top) "Breadfruit" pillow top basted only. Pattern by Kepola. (bottom) "Oak Leaf Block" from Ruth E. Finley's *OLD PATCHWORK QUILTS* plate 20. Photos by E. Gross.



In a small pamphlet prepared and printed by the Bank of Hawaii (not dated) entitled *THE HISTORY OF HAWAIIAN QUILTS* is another story. "A woman who was a retainer of Kamehameha IV and Queen Emma is of the opinion that the Hawaiian method (of making quilts) originated upon the birth of the Prince of Hawaii (1858) when the women began making

cont. on inside cover



P.O. Box 270 · Mill Valley, Ca 94941

Controlled Circulation
Postage Paid at
Mill Valley, CA 94941

Rosemarie Eisner
619 Corbett
San Francisco CA 94114 4/81

Hawaiian Quilts *cont. from back cover*

quilts for their heir apparent and that upon his first birthday, a processional was held and the Quilts presented to the little prince"

Lucy Thurston, wife of the Reverend Asa Thurston and member of the first group of missionaries wrote on Monday, April 3, 1820, "The first sewing circle was formed that the sun ever looked down upon in his Hawaiian realm. Kalakua, queen dowager, was directress. She requested all the seven white ladies to take seats with them on mats on the deck of the (brig) Thaddeus. Mrs. Holman and Mrs. Ruggles were executive officers to ply the scissors and to prepare the work. As the sisters were very much in the habit of journalizing, everyone was a self-constituted recording secretary. The four native women of distinction were furnished with calico patchwork to sew - a new employment for them."**

Mrs. Thurston's journal is a very detailed account of her life but there is no further mention of patchwork, quilts, or quilting. The journal of Lucia Ruggles Holman*** a member of the same group and wife of the first missionary doctor on the islands does not mention the incident at all.

The large applique motifs of the Hawaiian quilts which are cut from one piece of fabric, have marked similarity to the Pennsylvania Dutch papercuttings. Claudia Hopf defines Scherenschnitte or Papercutting as "the Swiss-German technique of cutting one piece of paper in a continuous design, although the paper can be folded from one to three times for repeats in overall pattern."**** The cuttings are frequently mounted on a background for contrast. A perfect description of a Hawaiian quilt.

Hawaiian quilters use familiar objects such as flowers or trees for motifs but occasionally she wants the quilt to "say something special."

In 1974 Kepola (Deborah Kakalia) came to the mainland and stayed in my home for three weeks. Before she left she cut out and gave me a beautiful pink and purple quilt top. She named it Kulana KieKie Hanole Loko Maikai which translated means The Highest Admiration of Joyful Hospitality.

Does that "say something special" to me?

*Stevens, Napua, *THE HAWAIIAN QUILT*, 1971

**Thurston, Lucy G., *LIFE and TIMES*, Ann Arbor, c 1882, 1921, 1934

***Holman, Lucia R., *JOURNAL*, Bishop Museum Special Publication 17 (Honolulu, 1931

****Hopf, Claudia *SCHERE-SCHNITTE-TRADITIONAL PAPER CUTTING*, Applied Arts Publishers, 1977

Classified

NANTUCKET ISLAND QUILTER'S SEMINAR is scheduled for fall 1980. Two wonderful workvacation weeks, both taught by Virginia Avery, author of "The Big Book of Applique". The first week is from September 28 to October 3; the second will be from October 5 to 10. Arrive Sunday, depart Friday. Limited registration. For details send a legal size S.A.S.E. to Claire Murray, Fair Gardens, 27 Fair St., Nantucket, Mass., 02554.

NEW ITEM, ESPECIALLY FOR QUILT LOVER and PATCHWORKERS. Name and address labels decorated with classic quilt block designs: Sunbonnet Sue, Pieced Basket, or Tree of Life. Design and your name and address (or any message up to 4 lines, 20 letters per line) printed in black on glossy white self-stick, pressure sensitive labels 3/4" x 2". Print your message or address clearly and state your choice of design. 175 labels only \$3.50 postpaid. Labels, Box 703-1A Westminster, Colorado 80030. Allow six weeks for delivery.

\$5,000 total cash and other prizes to be awarded at International Quilt Exhibit Contest Sales, Feb 13, 14, 15, 1981. San Diego County Fairgrounds, Del Mar. Calif. Includes \$1,000 cash prize for best quilt made from pattern in 1934 Sears Roebuck Quilt Pattern Book. Patterns are winners in the Chicago World's Fair Contest. Reprint of book may be ordered from Ruth Briggs, Quilts, P.O. Box 403, Rancho Santa Fe, Calif. 92067. \$2.50 includes postage.

"QUILTERS' ART" catalog of the Santa Rosa, Calif, quilt show of May 1980 for \$1.00. 150 quilts described (no pictures) send legal size stamped self addressed envelope to Santa Rosa Quilt Guild, Box 9251. Santa Rosa, CA 95405

* * * * *

Kepola and I had lectured about quilts during her visit and at one of the lectures I mentioned that the pineapple was a symbol of hospitality in colonial days. After the lecture we had discussed the pineapple and its symbolism.

Kepola had chosen the color pink to signify sweetness and the color purple (a royal color) to signify highest and adopted my symbolism of the pineapple. Put it all together to get the message, The Highest Admiration of Sweet Joyful Hospitality.

I never look at that quilt top without a feeling of closeness to Kepola and it serves as a reminder of the wonderful three weeks we spent together. That is what makes Hawaiian quilts so special.