

QUILTERS' JOURNAL

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Florence Peto

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PETO, FLORENCE H. GAWDEN: born Nov. 25, 1884 N.Y. died Aug. 29, 1970 N.J.; author, quilt collector, lecturer, consultant to Newark Museum of Art, Shelburne Museum. One of four children and oldest daughter of Ella & Jasper Gawden; married Joseph Peto Feb. 4, 1900. Two children Marjorie and John. Attended Jamaica N.Y. schools. Author of HISTORIC QUILTS, 1939 AMERICAN QUILTS & COVERLETS 1949, numerous articles on quilts & textiles in ANTIQUES, AMERICAN HOME, WOMAN'S DAY, McCALL'S NEEDLEWORK, HOBBIES, etc. Exhibits of selected quilts from her collection Henry Ford Museum, N.Y. Historical Society. Preceded in death by her husband and daughter.

Little is known about Florence Peto until 1939 when articles written by her appeared in ANTIQUES, MCCALL'S, and the AMERICAN HOME. For the next two decades she continued to write articles and lecture extensively in her area. She became an authority in the historical aspects of textiles and quilts.

One of her most important contributions to our quilt heritage was the careful documentation of the history of certain individual quilts. In publishing the information with accompanying photographs in her books and articles, she preserved the identity and memory of the quiltmaker as well as the quilt.

Three such quilts which are well-known to quilt scholars are the Emeline Dean quilt in the Newark Museum of Art, the Mary Totten Rising Sun in the Smithsonian Institution, and the Sophonisba Peale Star Medallion in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

In 1939, Emma Andres, who lived in Arizona saw a notice in MCCALL'S NEEDLEWORK about Florence Peto and a book entitled QUILTS DESIGNED AND MADE BY MEN. It was a subject that interested Miss Andres so she wrote to the magazine asking for information. Elizabeth Blondell replied that Mrs. Peto had asked that inquiries be made directly to her and enclosed the address. Within two weeks Miss Andres had a two page reply to her letter from Mrs. Peto with the salutation "Dear Emma Andres" dated April 1, 1939 "It was courteous of McCALL'S to send you my address for I enjoyed receiving your letter and am pleased to hear about your

hobby. All this began as a hobby with me too, only I feel now that, after giving thirty-five lectures this winter to Women's Clubs and for the Board of Education to their textile arts groups - well, it has outgrown the hobby stage.

My photographs of American-made quilts, spreads and woven coverlets numbers over three hundred - all have authentic histories verified by family records and papers... what I desire to do in gathering this material (is to) preserve the memory and identity of the quiltmaker as well as her needlework.

The work men have done along that line interests me very much and some of my research has turned up so much of interest that I have devoted a whole chapter to it in my book - HISTORIC QUILTS - which is still in the printer's hands. The chapter I spoke of is called "Quilts Designed and Made by Men"...And as I did not desire any of my material to appear without credit... that was why McCALL'S made the notation...

I'd love it if you would write to me again - if you cared to tell me more about your collection of man made quilts...

Thank you again for writing.

Sincerely yours
(signed Mrs. Joseph Florence Peto)

And so a correspondence began which continued until Mrs. Peto's death. It became a close relationship even though they did not meet for many years.

Miss Andres kept all of her letters, many in the original envelopes scotch-taped to the pages of three scrap books. The bulk of the correspondence was from the early years. In this issue we present excerpts from the letters of 1939-1941 when Mrs. Peto continued to address her "Dear Emma Andres:" *cont on next page...*

COVER PICTURE: Florence Peto holds a copy of her book HISTORIC QUILTS. "The intrigue of HISTORIC QUILTS starts with the jacket and lining, the pattern for which was taken from a pieced quilt signed and dated 'Sarah Harris - 1848'. The design 'Lend and Borrow' was known to most patchworkers as 'The Orange Peel' and was sometimes called 'Dolly Madison's Work Box.' The cover of the book looks like a piece of rare old homespun. "In the Spotlight" by Gertrude P. Wixson Photo courtesy of John Peto.

April 22, 1939

Thank you indeed for the friendly reply to my letter; I think all women who love quilts must have something very special about them. I, too, have had such lovely letters as a result of the many quilt articles which have appeared in magazines and as a response to press notices in various newspapers following a lecture ...

...Last Thursday I lectured to the women of The Contemporary Club of White Plains, N.Y. It is the largest club in Westchester and, in spite of pouring rain, there was an audience of three hundred. The committee had hung about seventy-five quilts and many of them were pieces of merit . . .most were quite old and several pieces were very old indeed. I exhibited my 18th century quilt, a beautiful Sunflower. And my southern Bride's Quilt dated 1838. Also my wild Penn-Dutch quilt top made in York in the 1840's. It has color! My own collection of quilts is small not more than eight exhibition pieces, but they are all noted for something; - characteristic of work done in certain locality, outstanding workmanship or personal background story. I was told of a quilt for sale in N.J. last week; it was beautiful and obviously as old as the owner said, but she wanted over a hundred dollars for it and that is beyond me these days. I have to earn the money with which to buy my quilts and believe me, I work for it, whether it comes from lecturing or writing.

...I shall look forward to receiving another (letter) when you find time to write.

Cordially yours:
(signed Florence Peto)

Sept. 16, 1939

...The book progresses beautifully; the publishers... say that it will be out October 15th;

...Engagements for Talks are coming in now, fast; I shall have to travel a little New England - mostly.

...We are faced with the possibility of moving to Jersey in the spring; after living thirty years in a house, it is very difficult to make up one's mind to do anything else.

Most sincerely yours
(signed Florence Peto)

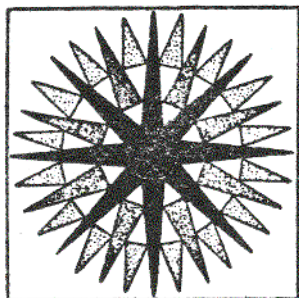
Oct. 14, 1939

The past month, and indeed more, has been hectic for me - there has been much to do at the publishers, and my daughter has been home from work ill, and the lecture season started last Monday with an engagement for a large and important group where I wanted to shine brightly like a person with no worries on her mind! Last week, I was guest of honor at The New Jersey Historical Society's annual luncheon - they had a quilt exhibition. Seems to be growing in popularity, here in the East anyway; I think the revival hit the western or mid-western states first...

I have so much stuff left over from the book which is all excellent, I could cry; but maybe I will get a chance to show it in magazines.

You asked in your letter how I find all the stories. Well, the lectures are nearly always given as the feature of a quilt exhibition. I arrive early and make notes of all the things that interest me and take the names and addresses of the owners. Whenever possible, I meet them and try to tell them what I am trying to do in making my record and ask outright for permission to borrow it for the purpose of having it photographed. Some people are distrustful at first and hesitate; sometimes it takes two or three visits before they unbend and tell me things. One woman - the one who owns the Johanna Bergen quilt and the lovely diary, loaned me the quilt for exhibition and picturing but insisted there was 'no history to it.' I knew the family history a little and knew that there must be; then one day she told me of the Diary but still insisted that it "didn't tell anything of interest". I begged her to allow me to be the judge and finally coaxed her to lend it to me which she did. There are four or five big ledger books to it and all written on yellowed paper in penmanship shaded and by now faded - it almost pulled my eyeballs out reading it ...Of course it had interest! It is history... I believe people are going to enjoy reading about it -I hope so. Not always do the finest quilts have the finest stories; some grand pieces, I cannot find out anything at all about while some plain and not too well made quilts will have thrilling background story. Some people may be going to say "I've seen better quilts than that!" - forgetting that it is the STORY as well as the quilt which is valuable Americana...

Sincerely your quilt friend
(signed Florence Peto)



RISING SUN

FLORENCE PETO
Author of
HISTORIC QUILTS
and
Interesting Lecturer on
PATCHWORK QUILTS

announces her new address

1293 SUSSEX RD.

WEST ENGLEWOOD - TEANECK, N. J.

Telephone Teaneck 7-0292

*Flyer distributed by
Florence Peto to an-
nounce her lectures.*

cont from pg 2...

Feb. 21, 1940

You will have to forgive me for a long silence; after all, I've had a hectic month! expected to be moved by this time but the weather has prevented the Jersey builder from doing any grading on the grounds about our new house so, while the house is completed and ready for occupancy, the "lawn" and "garden" look like the Rocky Mountains...

The book has been receiving splendid reviews; the N.Y. Herald Tribune, Sun., 11th gave it a fine write-up. That ought to sell some books! I believe the cost of manufacture has not yet been met which means - I have not received a penny so far! Think I can make more money talking than writing -at least I get paid for lectures!

Always your cordial quilt friend;
(signed Florence Peto)

April 16, 1940

I have spent a few evenings doing some pen and ink sketches of unusual pieced blocks. I do not know whether the three inch sketches will be guidance enough... I could follow such a drawing but perhaps others would find it difficult... I'm wondering if a little handbook of, say, 100 such drawings wouldn't sell? I receive so many appreciative and enthusiastic letters from people who have had my book - but, as yet, no money for me.

I'm a busy woman but lately I've been very tired - so tired I could get up from the dinner table and go straight to bed! It's probably old age checking up on me. Well, I suppose one has to try to fool him!

Yours full of aches and pains and groans
(signed Florence Peto)

May 24, 1940

Well I lived through another broadcasting experience; this time it was over station W.N.Y.C. - ...It was a mad house, too; musicians and speakers and workers and men moving things all around, chased up and down corridors trying to find out frenziedly where they belong - everybody with their eyes on watches or clocks... Anyway, people who heard it said I was 'fine' and the subject was "Friendship and Album quilts." An announcer asked all the questions and I had all the answers! The Index of American Design for whom I gave the broadcast have given me a lot of photographs of quilts, some of them most unusual. Now I have a lot of research work to do for there were no histories with them . . .I haven't but one engagement for next year. Last year at this time I was almost booked up. Clubs as well as individuals seem stunned by the war news and reluctant to make any plans; all of anybody's money seems to be going willingly to the Red Cross.

Yours in peace and sunlight,
(signed Florence Peto)

cont on pg 16...

Oct. 23, 1940

June 14, 1940

...War comes nearer and nearer to us. My own girl, for whom we took this house in order to have her with us once more, is enlisting for war duty with her Presbyterian Hospital unit; I must not complain for we are loyal Americans and must do as our conscience dictates. Definitely I myself will have no Quilt Talk engagements for next season as club program chairman are writing in to say that all club monies are being diverted to relief and Red Cross work. I admit that is right and proper but I am sorry for myself too for I have worked hard to make my lecture a successful thing.

Yours sincerely
(signed Florence Peto)

August 13, 1940

Going to get square with you and write this with pen this time instead of typewriter... I am in bed! Nothing serious; I guess if I rest all day today I'll be all right by tomorrow. You see, Saturday I gave my Quilt Talk to the members of Quaker Hill Historical Society of Pawling, N.Y. It was a long drive from here and a red hot day. Hanging quilts, lecturing, meeting personally all the members, answering thousands of questions, unhangng the quilts and driving home, all seems to have been too much for this sissy. I was awfully ill all Sat. night and in bed all day yesterday & today...

Am to repeat my lecture at the World's Fair; the Index of American Design considered it so successful they want to throw another "Quilting Bee".

Best wishes always
(signed Florence Peto)

Oct. 8, 1940

...My young daughter has been made Captain of the War Unit which is being formed at Presbyterian Hospital for war service -if we have war, which God forbid... I worked as a volunteer in a Brooklyn Hospital all through the last war but I doubt if I can do anything of the kind this time.

Sincerely yours
(signed Mrs. J. Florence Peto)

This is scrub-the-kitchen morning for me and I was in the midst of it when the postman tucked your second letter to me under the door or rather the slot; I read it immediately and here I am dripping soap suds at each elbow but I've got to write NOW!

...Day before yesterday I was in Macy's. Up to now the department stores have not put my book on their shelves - they would fill orders but would not stock. I bought a garden book and had it sent home and gave my name to the clerk as Mrs. Jos. Peto. Then I said; "I am disappointed at not seeing my own book on your shelves." The clerk looked at me and said "Are you Florence Peto?" I modestly admitted it. Then she said; "We have had your book on the shelves and now are all sold out - lots of people ask for it; we are sending for a new supply for the holiday trade. It is a lovely book - we all like it here in the department." THAT was something - for Macy's. I felt all puffed up and bought some soap and towels from them - sheer good will!

My daughter and I went to the Antique Show held in the Commodore Hotel last night (all this week in fact); saw so many lovely things I'm still dizzy from it this morning. The prices were dizzy, too. There were a few quilts but nothing outstanding - from an exhibition point of view. There was a beautifully quilted "Star and Princess Plume" in red and green on white muslin for \$30. that would have been a grand buy... I think you ought to add an old quilt to your collection some time; that is, if you haven't done so. None of mine are for sale but I often know where fine ones can be obtained and sometimes very reasonably.

I fell for two little swatches of early American calicoe last night; paid \$1.25 a piece for them and Marjorie thought I was crazy. But they are unusual and very interesting and I have started a scrap book of old textiles and they are going to be nice in it. The W.P.A. artists have already painted some of the textiles I have found, for the Gov. records.

Well, we look silly here with half the kitchen floor clean and half dirty - I've got to get busy again! I wish I had four pair of hands - my mind and the things I want to do outrace the one pair of hands

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cont. from p. 16

I've been born with. Lectures start very soon and I have to get a pretty wardrobe. with nice shoes and stockings ready; hair has to be dolled up - a new permanent - I resent the time it takes.

Good luck;
(signed Florence Peto)

November 17, 1940

...I have to lecture again tomorrow in southern New Jersey. A man has sent me the most beautiful quilt which was made by his great-grandmother and which he wants to sell I may buy it myself but I mean to show it tomorrow with a "For Sale" sign on it. It is a version of the Sunflower pattern - something like my own shown in Plate No. 5 - HISTORIC QUILTS. The blocks are smaller and the sunflower has been set together diagonally across the quilt. It is made of English calicoes in all the soft tones of brown, rosy beige, pale blue and lavender - exquisite coloring. The quilting is half-inch diamonds all over the whole quilt. It is in splendid condition, not a break in it but is very old; it is backed in homespun. It is adorable on my old maple four-poster and I'd like to have it only I already have 20 spreads for three beds and my husband thinks I am crazy. The owner wants \$35. for it and it is honestly worth much more.

And now I must quit if the family is to have any dinner today. Thank heaven my husband is still able to earn the bread and butter - and I hope, the turkey. Have a fine Thanksgiving Day - which do you celebrate? The President's idea or the Pilgrim's?

Yours in friendliness;
(signed Florence Peto)

December 17, 1940

Daughter Marjorie has been home from work with the flu all last week and is still home though better.

Have I written to you since my broadcast over W.J.Z. for Nancy Craig on her "Woman of Tomorrow" program... This is my third broadcast and everyone has written to tell me how good I was! Maybe I'll be a radio star yet. They were very nice to me in the N.B.C. studio but I still prefer to address - a regular audience; there is something very impersonal about speaking into a chromium tube.

I like to have people smile back at me. The "interview" was about the book of course and it was fine publicity for me just before Christmas - hope it boosts our holiday sales.

Well, I fell for the sunflower quilt myself and love it so much I think I will keep it awhile anyway before selling it. I've been thinking seriously lately of buying and selling quilts; I get such amazing chances to buy such beautiful things it seems a great pity not to get them while I can! But of course I cannot go on and on collecting.

And now I must quit; have a happy day and indeed accept my thanks again for being the good friend you always are. I always welcome your gay letters and how I wish we lived nearer.

My best to you;
(signed Florence Peto)

J.G.

If you enjoyed these excerpts and would like us to publish some of the others please let us know.

Ernest Thompson Seton

The Wild Animal Quilt designed by Ernest Thompson Seton was published in the Fall 1979 JOURNAL. It was first published by the LADIES HOME JOURNAL in Jan. 1905 as part of a series of quilts designed by famous authors and artists.

Mr. Seton was born Ernest Evan Thompson in South Shields, England, on Aug. 4, 1860. He grew up in Canada and studied art in Europe. In 1898 he legally changed his name to Ernest Thompson Seton (a family name)

In the late 19th century he began his illustrated accounts of animal life in the West. Though he drew and painted western subjects throughout his long life, he is best known for his animal drawings.

Seton helped found the Boy Scouts of America, wrote their first handbook, and served as the first Chief Scout for five years.

In 1930 he and his wife settled near Santa Fe, N.M. They founded Seton Village where he died Oct. 23, 1946.

Quilters' Hall of Fame

A Quilter's Hall of Fame sprang into being on October 27, 1979 with a surprise announcement at the banquet session of the Continental Quilt Congress, Inc. Officers of the corporation Hazel Carter, President, and Holice Turnbow, Vice-President, and writer Ellen Dykes had prepared a lovely booklet as a memento of the occasion, copies of which were presented to persons attending the banquet. The booklet's introduction states that "Quilters' Hall of Fame has been established to recognize the people behind the quilting renaissance, to pay tribute to their accomplishments, and thereby to establish documentation of a part of quilting history."

The 1979 entries into the Hall of Fame are listed and described in the booklet. They are: William Rush Dunton, Jr., Ruth Ehright Finley, Lenice Ingram Bacon, Marguerite Ickis, and Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof (entered together). This year's entries are all notable authors of books on quilts.

The main speaker at the presentation banquet was Jonathan Holstein (see story on next col.) and the special guest of the Congress was Marguerite Ickis. Miss Ickis, author of THE STANDARD BOOK OF QUILTMaking, was honored with a standing ovation when she was formally introduced, and was almost besieged with greetings, handshakes, and requests for autographs throughout the three-day Congress. The enthusiasm with which she was welcomed and congratulated left no doubt about her fame. Her friends and neighbors feted her again when she got home, and she reports that "the quilting party is still going on!"

Sally Garoutte

* * * * *

cont from pg 13...

nail and then finish by pushing it through with my thimble.

...you may believe I have sore fingers from the time I begin to quilt until I get it done. My 1st & 2nd fingers scab up thick enough so I have to use sand paper on them.

I do not use any particular kind of a needle. I have a thousand or more that my wife left and I select one and use it until I break off the front and then hunt up another. But I use a short stubbed one that will do the work without bending much.

Yours very respectfully

Jonathan Holstein on Art

Jonathan Holstein, premier quilt-collector and author of AMERICAN PIECED QUILTS, a catalogue of his quilts exhibited at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1971, later expanded into the book THE PIECED QUILT, was the featured banquet speaker at the recent Continental Quilt Congress at the Stouffer Hotel in Arlington, Va. In this presentation Holstein contracted his views of the place of quilts in Art, concluding ultimately that they have no place at all.

First, the collector-writer reminisced about past collecting and writing. Then he moved to definitions which he felt might be applied to quilts: Primitive art, Naive art, Nonacademic art, Folk art and Tribal art. He rejected the first three of these, and seemed rather to incline toward Folk art as his preferred description, although he felt that quilts stand somewhere between "design" and "folk art," being "utilitarian objects which are pleasing to the eye."

After presenting some extremely questionable theories regarding the origins of American quilts, Holstein did admit that he thought that pieced quilts had their origin in esthetic principles. However, he said, women were not artists, as they did not speak Artlanguage. "I have no reason to change my opinion," Holstein said. Art is only made by artists; and since, in his opinion, women are not artists, quilts -by his definition -- cannot be art.

Maybe Holstein is right. And maybe quilters don't care. They know what they are doing; it doesn't matter what it's called.

Sally Garoutte

HELP WANTED

I am researching black quiltmakers in U.S., from the earliest record to present day. Would you please share any information you have on quilts made by black women, slavemade quilts, post-Civil War quilts, or Contemporary Quilts. Or if you have addresses to which I should write, I would appreciate getting these.

Cuesta Benberry
5150 Terry Ave.
St. Louis, MO 63115

If you have a specific area of research you would like help with, drop us a note explaining briefly what you are looking for and we'll try to publish it. Let's all help each other.