

Alabama Quilts

by Gail Andrews

Ms Andrews is Curator of Decorative Arts at the Birmingham Museum of Art. She wrote one of the excellent essays in the catalog BLACK BELT TO HILL COUNTRY: Alabama Quilts from the Robert & Helen Cargo Collection.

"To the fair daughter of Eve, domestic excellence is the predominating excellence" Feb 1819, LADIES MAGAZINE, publ Savannah, Georgia.

The exhibition of Alabama-made quilts held at the Birmingham Museum of Art and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in 1981, did not attempt to make a statement about an Alabama "type" of quilt, but rather about the individuals who created these stunningly beautiful objects

The Alabama woman of the nineteenth century despite her image as "belle", bore few differences from women in other rural regions of the United States. The same endless round of domestic tasks filled her days and years. While the amount and type of work each woman performed varied with her economic and social situation and her geographic location, women of leisure were rare. Each, whether mistress of a large plantation or wife of a yeoman farmer, had the responsibility (either directly or through oversight) of spinning, weaving, sewing, nursing the sick, caring for the garden and poultry, and preparing food. Diaries indicate that hog butchering, rendering lard, whitewashing, pickling, ironing and planting vegetables were routine activities:

Oct 20, 1859. Put in quilt for Olivia.

Oct 21. Spent day in quilting. Some hog drovers spent the night here.

Nov 2. Preparing a web of cloth for the loom. Wrote to Thomas.

Nov 8. Mrs and Miss Echels spent the afternoon with us. Loaned Miss E. a piece of my painting which she wishes to copy.

Nov 15. Still cold, we received this morning by the boat of yesterday our winter shoes, also some cloth.

Nov 21. Pleasant weather, commenced making calico dresses, also pants for Mr. E.

Dec 7. This has been a busy day. We slaughtered 15 hogs, large ones. It is my birthday and I sit this evening by a cheerful fire, recording the fact - 44 I have seen.

Dec 19. . . put in a quilt - also cut a vest for Mr. Brewer.

Feb 2, 1860. . . I moulded our year's allowance of candles.

April 12. I commenced weaving today.

April 14. . . Exchanged fowls with Mrs Hail.

April 22. . . The garden looks like an Eden, with its wealth of early roses and jonquils and pinks. The kitchen garden is splendid.

Sewing, making clothes, bed linen and cover (Quilts and coverlets) occupied a significant portion of time. Francis Trollope, an early observer of American life and culture, recognized the important role needlework played in America and often commented upon its prevalence, stating: "The plough is hardly a more blessed instrument in American life than the needle." Women in all areas of the nation and from all backgrounds plied their needles in the construction of objects of utility and beauty. The purposes varied; young girls were instructed through samplers and piecing squares of cloth. Older women made virtue of leisure time working bits of cloth and thread, while others, of necessity, "quilted for cover". Quilts providing warmth from cold nights and decorative embellishments for interiors were made by women everywhere, sometimes as another domestic chore, other times as a creative outlet.

Many women felt the drudgery of this constant and necessary occupation. Carolyn Long Shields of Georgia expressed her strong feelings on the task:

Nov 3, 1865. Made a black silk waist to be my dress and had much trouble with it. I think life would be so much more pleasant were it not for the trouble and bother of sewing and making clothes. I do wish mother Eve's style had always been in vogue. I wouldn't mind pinning a few leaves together, but oh! deliver me from the monotonous stitch stitch from morning 'til night and (give?) rest for aching eyes, sore fingers and the like.

Even elaborate and decorative quilts did not always ease frustrations sometimes associated with the needle. Again, Carolyn Shields: "Nov 8, 1865. . . came home, tried to help frame a quilt but had to go to bed as my head hurt so much. Nov 9: quilting

BLACK BELT TO HILL COUNTRY: Alabama Quilts from the Helen & Rob't Cargo Collection. 125 pgs, fully illus., 10 color plates and 45 B & W illus as well as three essays. \$6.00 plus \$1.25 postage from the Birmingham Museum of Art, 2000 Eighth Ave, No Birmingham AL 35203

today. . . Nov 11: We were oh! so busy trying to finish that abominable quilt.

Though perhaps frustrating for the young, quilt-making was part of a woman's life from a very early age. Nine-year-old Alice Coleman of Eutaw, Alabama in a letter to her cousin in May of 1849 mentions her completed quilt as just more bit of news: "I have done my quilt and it is quilted, and mother has quilted one since." Or take the case of Mattie Sue, as illustrated in STARS FELL ON ALABAMA by Carl Carmer: We crossed the dog-trot to the right wing. It was a long low room. In a corner lay a great rectangular burlap bag. A patchwork quilt partially covered it. Beside it was a pile of quilts. Beside that pile was another. The whole wall was lined with them. There were at least a hundred. I gasped. Knox laughed. "Do you reckon we'll have enough cover?" He turned to me "Henry married Mattie Sue to get these quilts." Henry laughed self-consciously. "Don't let Mr. Knox deceive yuh, perfesser. Mattie Sue's pap and mammy, they made each one o'their gals (they had three) make a hundred 'fore she could get married. "They're beautiful," I said, "and the patterns are all different."

"They're piled up accordin' to patterns," said Mattie Sue. This pile's all from the Bible. Here's Garden of Eden and Star of Bethlehem and Tree of Paradise. Then there's Golden Gates and Solomon's Temple and Forbidden Fruit and Joseph's Coat. "What's this pile?" I said. "Them's all politics," said Mattie Sue. Hebson's Kiss and Lincoln's Platform and Whig Rose and a lot more.

"What's the one on the bed?"

"Hearts an' Gizzards, an' right beside it is Hairpin Catch an' Tangled Garters, Drunkard's Path, Devil's Claws, Crosses an Losses, Odds an' Ends, Air Castles, Wonder of the World an' Aunt Sulk's Patch. They's lots more but we better eat if we're goin' to carry you to the fiddlers' convention."

Patchwork and applique gave women options - a chance to make choices of a pattern and fabric. Creating a bedcover offered the opportunity to shape the interior environment. This must have offered comfort when the external environment and forces seemed so brutal. Additionally, piecing and quilting provided one of the few quiet times a woman had within her household routine. It was a time for thinking and redefining plans and expectations and a time for reflection. Women in the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries had little leisure time; the satisfaction of quiltmaking was often a source of pride, strength, emotional gratification and personal expression. In the words of one quilter:

"You can't always change things. Sometimes you don't have no control over the way things go. Hail ruins the crops or fire burns you out. And then you're just given so much to work with in a life and you have to do the best you can with what you got. That's what piecing is. The materials is passed on to you. Your fate. But the way you put them together is your business."

Similarly, rewards of utility, beauty and contemplation are strong attractions for today's quilters. "It just gives me pleasure," is a sentiment expressed by many. Although the tradition remains intact, incorporation of new materials and techniques has added another dimension. Many contemporary quilters are experimenting with photo-silkscreening, fiber reactive dyes, fabric paints, crayons and other techniques to alter the character and appearance of fabrics.

Other quilters, using the traditional vocabulary of patchwork and applique, juxtapose various hues and types of fabric to give familiar patterns new vibrancy and life. One quilter who possesses an especially vivid pallet was asked how she chose her colors. "Well, you just gotta use your head. Can't get colors like you used to. I used to get a deep sapphire blue, can't get that anymore. I use sheeting for the lining, it's cheaper. . . I never use double knit in my quilts, it's like quilting rubber."

The personal expression of each maker insures the survival of quiltmaking long after mass-produced blankets and spreads have superseded its utilitarian purpose. The organization of the bits and pieces and the planning of the quilting stitches reveal the maker's sense of color, harmony and design. They also reflect her perception of her environment. A quilt speaks to us of the maker's life - a visual record of her existence, just as her diary is a written record. It provides a tangible reminder of work, work that does not "perish with the usin". Quilters are artists who make the critical nexus between art and life.

