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Signature Quilts: Nineteenth-Century Trends

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Over the past twenty-five years, researchers in the fields of folklore, anthropology, and cultural geography have studied patterns in surviving nineteenth-century artifacts to determine the history and origins of American culture. By tracing the diffusion of innovations such as the banjo, gravestone motifs, and agricultural practices, inferences can be drawn about cultural influences. Backtracking along paths of diffusion has pinpointed four major points of origin for American cultural traditions: the New England (New York/Boston) area, the Midland Zone (the Valleys of the Susquehana and Delaware Rivers in eastern Pennsylvania and western New Jersey), The Chesapeake Bay region (near Baltimore), and the Southern Coast (from North Carolina to Georgia).[1]

Domestic architecture has been a popular subject for analysis ever since Fred B. Kniffen advocated using folk housing to reconstruct diffusion routes of material culture in 1965. He proposed that scholars identify and classify artifacts according to type and plot the types through time and space, geographical methods that allow interpretation of origins, dissemination routes, and the diffusion of a culture.[2] Using Kniffen's methods, Terry G. Jordan and Matti Kaups mapped dogtrot or open-passage folk housing throughout the United States and Europe, finding Finnish origins for this backwoods house rather than the purely British influence which had been suggested in the past.[3]

Folk housing, such as the dogtrot cabin, the shotgun house, or the Colonial Revival house, has several advantages for study. Buildings are diverse, yet classifiable according to form. They are durable, and they usually remain where they were built, giving later

observers the opportunity to map their occurrence and draw conclusions about settlement patterns and changes in style.

Quilts are similar in that they are diverse, yet classifiable. They are durable. Despite their apparent fragility thousands of nineteenth-century examples remain. But unlike buildings, quilts do not often endure in the spot where they were made. Their portability and practicality made quilts and bedding among the few household items that nineteenth-century migrants were encouraged to take with them on the road west.[4] The difficulty in determining exactly where an emigrant's quilt was made renders many of them useless for studying regional differences in quilt design or for studying patterns of migration and transmission of culture.

Signature quilts, however, are one type of quilt which can be analyzed using the methods Kniffen advocated for the study of folk housing. Signature quilts are group projects in which each block is sewn or signed by a different person. The finished quilt might be presented as a gift or kept by the organizer as a tangible reminder of friends and relatives.

The makers of signature quilts often recorded not only their names but their homes and the dates on the piece, so no matter where their current locations, the quilts reveal their origins in inked or embroidered inscriptions. Many of those without inscribed place names are accompanied by reliable family histories passed down with the quilts. Since a signature quilt contains records of several people, rather than of an individual, origins can often be corroborated using written records, such as censuses and church membership lists, which can pinpoint where and when the individuals lived as a community. In this paper I will examine the national distribution of the signature quilt style in the nineteenth century. Most researchers have focused on signature quilts from specific regions, primarily Baltimore, Maryland, and the Delaware River Valley. As a Kansan, I was interested in a wider view of the signature quilt. When I see an 1861 friendship quilt thought to be made in Lecompton, Kansas, or a Peabody, Kansas, sampler album that looks to be made in the 1850s, I want to know how accurate the Kansas attribution might be. Were Kansas settlers making signature quilts in the 1850s? How fast and how far did the signature quilt fashion spread?

While examining date-inscribed quilts as a means of developing guidelines for dating unsigned quilts,[5] I also analyzed signature quilts by plotting them across time and space to determine the source and transmission of the style. I collected data on quilts made anywhere in the United States. I used quilts I found pictured in current quilt literature and that of the recent past. I also used quilts I saw on exhibition and in museum and private collections. I relied on museum catalog cards when I could not see the quilts themselves, and I read some of the forms from three statewide quilt surveys (Quilts of Tennessee, the North Carolina Quilt Project, and the Kansas Quilt Project). At this point I have information on over 1,000 date-inscribed American quilts in a computerized file using DBase III. Of those, 227 were nineteenth-century signature quilts, upon which I have based this study.

I defined a signature quilt as a block-style quilt with more than one signature on its face. (Some had only two signatures.) I studied two types, the album in which each block is different, and the friendship quilt in which all the blocks are identical (although early examples often included a second design in the corners or center square.) As the terms "friendship quilt" and "album quilt" can be confusing, I will be more descriptive, calling the first a *sampler album*, the second a *single-pattern friendship* quilt. The designs in either may be piecework, embroidery, or applique. I omitted from the database fundraiser quilts, which also have more than one signature per block, and crazy quilts, as these styles were most popular after 1880 when magazines and other forms of popular culture began influencing what previously had been folk culture. In my database I included 121 sampler albums and 106 single-pattern friendship quilts.

Dates of Popularity

Those who have studied signature quilts are in general agreement about the dates of origin and peaks of fashion along the east coast. William Rush Dunton, the first to note the many signature quilts made in Baltimore, determined their heydey to be the years 1842 to 1853.[6] Dena Katzenberg, who studied Baltimore sampler albums,

narrowed the dates of popularity in that city to 1846 to 1852.[7] Jessica Nicoll looked at signature quilts made in the Delaware River Valley areas of Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey and suggested a span of 1841 to 1855.[8] Jane Bentley Kolter described signature quilts made throughout the U.S. and concluded that 1840 was the starting point and 1870 the end of the style.[9] Linda Otto Lipsett characterized the span of signature friendship quilts as 1840 to 1875, with the 1840s and 1850s as the peak.[10]

The earliest signature quilt in the literature with a reliable date actually inscribed upon it is a single-pattern friendship quilt dated 1839–1843.[11] There are three signature quilts with blocks dated 1841, and twelve with blocks dated 1842, indicating that the idea of signing blocks for a group quilt caught on in the early 1840s. As the early examples usually contain blocks that span several years, it is difficult to determine if one type predates the other. However, four of the five quilts with blocks dated before 1842 are single-pattern friendship quilts, an indication that this style was initially more popular than the sampler album style.

The fad (and it does appear to be a fad with a sudden emergence and a sharp immediate rise followed by a trailing off of popularity) hit its peak in the mid-1840s and faded in the late 1850s. I found more dated examples of the sampler album than of the single-pattern friendship type; the sampler album type also maintained its initial popularity a few years longer. There were few examples of either type dated in the 1860s. The Civil War may have disrupted the practice during that decade, but a decline in both types is evident in 1853, eight years before the war began.

Kolter and Lipsett, who looked at quilts from the widest areas, indicated dates of 1870 and 1875, respectively, as the end of the album tradition.[12] However, a national overview of dated examples conflicts with this view. Rather than dying out, signature quilts enjoyed a revival in the 1880s and 1890s with a few changes. The single-pattern friendship quilt succeeded the sampler album as the more popular type in the last decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Sampler albums revived at the end of the century, but applique was no longer the most common technique. Album quiltmakers began to favor outline-embroidered blocks, a trend which continued into the twentieth century. The typical sampler album of 1930 might be a collection of floral blocks, em-

Figure 1. Incidence of Signature Quilts, 1840–1899.

broidered on pre-stamped squares sold by the Rainbow Quilt Company or Home Art Company.

I limited my study of signature blocks to the nineteenth century as I felt I lacked a national view of twentieth-century signature quilts. Few are pictured in books, collected by museums, or exhibited in galleries due to their visual qualities (currently unpopular with decorators and collectors), sources as kits and commercial patterns, and their relatively recent origins. My experience with twentieth-century signature quilts is limited to those I see in Kansas, primarily through the Kansas Quilt Project, but that observation indicates that embroidered sampler albums and pieced single-pattern friendship quilts were quite popular in Kansas in the 1920s and 1930s and this also may be true throughout the rest of the country.

In summary, examination of dated nineteenth-century examples corroborates information in the recent literature ascribing the origins of the signature quilt style to the early 1840s, followed by a sudden

surge in popularity through the early 1850s, and a general decline in the 1860s and 1870s. It offers new evidence that the style revived in the 1880s and 1890s.

Geographic Patterns of Popularity

Kolter speculated that the fashion for signature quilts originated in Pennsylvania and Maryland and spread first to New York and Ohio, then to Virginia and North Carolina.[13] Nicoll described the source as the Delaware River Valley which runs along the Pennsylvania-New Jersey border.[14] A look at the earliest quilts (six quilts with blocks dated 1842) indicates that both are correct; the fashion seems to have originated in a wide area, from Morristown, New Jersey, south to Baltimore, generally along a line between the two largest cities of the era—New York and Baltimore. When the entire group of quilts dated before 1845 is mapped, the same area from Northern New Jersey along the Delaware River to the Chesapeake Bay is highlighted, with additional indications that the fashion had spread to western Maryland and central Virginia. Some geographic preference for type appears in the early years, as most of the single-pattern friendship quilts are grouped along the Delaware River and the early sampler albums range over a wider area from central Virginia north to Staten Island with the highest concentration in the Baltimore area.

During the next five-year period, 1845–1849, the signature style spread north to Maine, south to coastal South Carolina, and west to Ohio's Western Reserve. There is even one quilt in this period attributed to New Braunfels, Texas. However, most of the blocks made between 1845 and 1849 continued to spring from the Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New Jersey areas.

In the next five-year period, 1850–1854, the only significant geographical change is that Pennsylvania is no longer well-represented; the fad seems to have faded there first. By the period 1855–1859, the fashion had also waned in New Jersey and Baltimore. Apparently the urban trendsetters tired of the style while their rural sisters continued to organize signature quilts.

During the 1860s and 1870s, the few quilts made ranged over a wider area, as far west as Salt Lake City where the ladies of the

Female Relief Society made an appliqued sampler album in 1870, fifteen years after it had become *passe* in Baltimore.[15]

In the 1880s and 1890s, the single pattern friendship quilt began to increase in numbers, but little geographic clustering is evident. Quiltmakers from the Great Plains eastward made signature quilts. One area not represented, however, is the area where it all began. From New York City south to Baltimore, I found no dated examples in these decades.

Geographic clustering over the years indicated a continuing regional preference for type. The sampler albums were most popular early in the Baltimore and Philadelphia areas, while the single-pattern friendship quilts were preferred by quilters in the Delaware Valley of eastern Pennsylvania and western New Jersey. Sampler album quilts tended to cluster along the Baltimore-New York axis, while single-pattern friendship quilts were made in more scattered areas, especially central New York and New England, where few sampler albums were made.

Trends are also apparent in the distribution of the sampler album quilt. The fashion for signing quilt blocks was initially popular in and near Philadelphia. Three of the six sampler albums dated 1842 come from that city and its environs, and only one from Baltimore. They do not feature the complex applique patterns that we consider the hallmark of the sampler album. One of the six (from Philadelphia) is entirely pieced and another (from Lisbon, New Jersey) is all appliqued of cut-out chintz or *broderie perse*. The rest are a combination of intricately pieced blocks, cut-out chintz, and rather simple applique, with piecework the predominant technique. We do not begin to see the classic applique sampler we call a Baltimore Album quilt until 1845 or 1846. I surmise that the idea of a sampler began in the Philadelphia area and spread rapidly to Baltimore, where seamstresses developed the distinctive applique sampler that eclipsed the earlier sampler of elaborate pieced blocks, which might be referred to as the Philadelphia Album.

Most of us are familiar with the applique Baltimore Album look. It is important to note that these elaborate appliqued sampler albums were not exclusively from Baltimore, even in the early years, but were also made in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Virginia, and other eastern seaboard states.

Figure 2. Sampler album quilt, made for Mary E. Mannakee (1827–?) in Montgomery County, Maryland. Inscribed 1850–1851. Collection of the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, Washington, D.C. Gift of Mrs. Benjamin Catching.

In summary, the style began in the Midland and Chesapeake Bay zones and rather quickly diffused north and south along the Atlantic coast, and as far west as Ohio. As the fashion for signature quilts faded in the east after the Civil War, it appeared in the newly-settled western states.

Because mid-century signature quilts are found all over the United States today, one is inclined to believe they were made throughout the country. The data indicate that during the first twenty years of the style, a national view of the signature style is actually a re-

gional view. Although there were twenty-eight states in the union in 1847, when the style was at its peak, signature quilts were most likely to be made in only half of them. The women who settled the western states in the 1840s and 1850s may have brought their signature quilts with them, but the idea of making them did not diffuse so rapidly.

The pattern of migration demonstrated by these figures should encourage a sense of skepticism in ascribing mid-western origins for mid-century signature quilts. A personal example: After looking at the data, I checked the 1860 and 1865 censuses for names of the alleged Lecompton settlers who made the quilt dated 1861 (the year of Kansas statehood) and found none of them. It was most likely made in the eastern United States and brought to Kansas at a later date.

Construction Trends as Clues to Date

The patterns of origin and diffusion can assist quilt historians in assigning geographical locations to signature quilts. Some details of construction can also be useful clues to date. Most sampler albums in the database had blocks of identical size, but some quiltmakers persisted with an older concept, a central design focus, obtained by including one large block in the center of a field of equally-sized blocks. Thirty per cent of the sampler albums dated between 1840 and 1844 included this central design focus, a format that faded over the years. Between 1845 and 1849, only eleven per cent featured larger blocks in the center. Not one sampler album dated in the 1850s had a central focus, an indicator that a larger block in the center of the quilt is a clue to a sampler album from the 1840s.

Observation also indicated that sampler album quilts and samplers made by individuals in the 1840s and 1850s can be characterized as orderly. After the Civil War we begin to see a hodge-podge of different block sizes arranged rather haphazardly. Thus a chaotic arrangement of different size blocks is an indication of a date after 1865.

Trends in Applique Patterns

I had projected that studying signature quilts would give me some insight into pattern development, especially the origins and diffusion of the traditional applique designs that developed at the same time as the sampler album. To track trends, I cut up photocopies of ninety-two sampler albums, dated from 1840 to 1876, and organized the hundreds of applique blocks into groups of similar patterns, such as fleurs-de-lis, bouquets, closed wreaths, and open wreaths. I sought to create an index useful in identifying the source of undated quilts, for example, an unsigned applique sampler found in Peabody, Kansas, by the Kansas Quilt Project.[16] I knew it was unlikely to be Kansas-made, but was it a Baltimore quilt? I could not match the eighteen blocks to the hundreds in the index. Although there are similar baskets or wreaths, an identical design or even a near match is rare. I am not optimistic that this sort of pattern index could help date or place a quilt beyond a general attribution of "1840–1860, probably east coast of the United States."

Through the pattern index I also attempted to support my thesis that the popularity of the sampler album style generated the applique designs that became popular for single-pattern quilts made by individuals. However, I found my sample too small to yield reliable conclusions. I did find that most of the standard applique designs appeared concurrently as single-maker, single-pattern quilts and as blocks in sampler albums. The Mexican Rose appears in single-pattern quilts dated 1849 and 1853 (two examples), and in sampler albums dated 1847, 1853, 1855 (two examples), and 1863. The Fleur-de-Lis appears in dozens of sampler albums made after 1844 and in single-pattern quilts dated 1846–1848, 1856, and 1859. However, I have too few dated examples of most patterns and the dates are too close to determine whether the design originated as a sampler album pattern or as a single-maker, single-pattern quilt. One exception is the Oak Leaf and Reel design, which was quite common in both types of signature quilts. There are single-pattern, single-maker quilts in this design dated 1818, 1829, and 1830. It is one of the few applique patterns that predates the signature style.

Most of the standard applique designs that appeared after 1840 seem to have originated in the Baltimore-Chesapeake Bay area. One

exception is a symmetrical arrangement of hearts that seems to have developed in the New York-New Jersey region.[17] A few patterns that were very popular for single-pattern quilts by individuals, such as the Princess Feather and the Whig Rose, rarely appeared in album quilts. The complexity of these designs often dictates a large block (18 inches or more), which may have deterred quiltmakers from using them in the smaller blocks that generally made up signature quilts. However, equally complex designs were popular for album quilts, so some other factors may have influenced the categorization of some designs as more appropriate for single-pattern quilts by individual makers. The reverse is more commonly true. Many designs popular in the album quilts never became standard patterns. The broad range of applique patterns in the sampler albums of the mid-nineteenth century indicates that the makers were exploring the design possibilities of a new technique. Certain patterns caught on and spread around the country; others disappeared after a few years or one single block. These signature quilts were design workbooks as well as expressions of friendship.

Conclusion

This study indicates a definite regional origin for the signature quilt style, an origin in the Midland and Chesapeake regions that have generated many of the vernacular arts we define as American's folk culture. My work represents an adaption of geographic methodology using quilts as artifacts. As state and regional surveys of quilts add to our database we will have more opportunities to study quilts in their geographic contexts. Signature quilts from the Philadelphia region in the early 1840s may offer interesting contrast to the Baltimore-Chesapeake Bay quilts of the same years, and signature quilts from the South Carolina coast may show regional variations in the 1850s and 1860s. More information on quilts from the south (northern quilts are currently collected and pictured far more often than southern quilts) may give us additional insight into the diffusion of the signature style.

State and county quilt projects acquiring information about quilts which are reliably attributed to specific geographic origins can also use these methods with quilts other than signature quilts. By comparing types across regions we may soon be able to draw many new

conclusions about the origins and diffusion of mid-nineteenth century pattern and style.

Notes and References

1. Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 83; Henry Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), 35–36. Zelinsky lists three nuclear nodes for cultural dissemination: Southern New England, The Midland, and the Chesapeake Bay region. Glassie lists four.
2. Fred B. Kniffen, "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 58 (1965): 549–77.
3. Terry G. Jordan and Matti Kaups, "Folk Architecture in Cultural and Ecological Context," in *The Geographical Review* 77, no. 1 (January 1987): 52–75.
4. Among the guidebooks that listed bedding as a top priority for pioneers are Rudolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler: A Hand-Book for Overland Expeditions* (New York: Harper, 1859), 40; and James Redpath and Richard Hinton, *Hand-book to Kansas Territory and the Rocky Mountains Gold Region* (New York: Colton, 1859), 30. Marcy suggested, "The bedding for each person should consist of two blankets, a comforter, and a pillow, and a gutta percha or painted canvas cloth to spread beneath the bed upon the ground and to contain it when rolled up for transportation."
5. Barbara Brackman, *Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts* (McLean, VA: EPM, 1989).
6. William Rush Dunton, *Old Quilts* (Catonsville, MD: privately printed, 1946), 175.
7. Dena S. Katzenberg, *Baltimore Album Quilts* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1981), 14, 65.
8. Jessica F. Nicoll, *Quilted for Friends: Delaware Valley Signature Quilts, 1840–1855* (Winterthur, DE: Henry Francis Dupont Winterthur Museum, 1986), 5.
9. Jane Bentley Kolter, *Forget Me Not: A Gallery of Friendship and Album Quilts*, (Pittstown, NJ: Main Street Press, 1985), 9, 52.
10. Linda Otto Lipsett, *Remember Me: Women and their Friendship Quilts* (San Francisco: Quilt Digest Press, 1985), 19.
11. The example inscribed 1839–1843 is pictured in Kolter, plate 93. There are a few signature quilts in the literature with earlier dates that ap-

pear to be altered or of a commemorative nature, rather than the date the quilt was made. See the ELI quilt dated 1817 in Myron Orlofsky and Patsy Orlofsky, *Quilts in America* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974), 235, and a quilt dated 1828–1891 in Mary Merriam and Suzanne C. Flynt, *Quilts* (Deerfield, CT: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, 1985), 21. The fabrics, patterns and style in both appear to be far later than the inscribed dates.

12. Kolter, 52; Lipsett, 19.
13. Kolter, 10.
14. Nicoll, 7.
15. Quilt is pictured in Kate B. Carter, *Pioneer Quilts* (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1979), 71.
16. Kansas Quilt Project #Fa125.
17. An example of a single-pattern quilt in a variation of this design is pictured in Marguerite Ickis, *The Standard Book of Quilt Making and Collecting*. (New York: Greystone, 1949; reprinted by Dover, 1959), 47. She calls it "Traditional Geometric Design."